Healing Burns with Fire: The Facilitations of Experience in Tibetan Buddhism

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The mid-world is best.
(Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Experience")

THIS ARTICLE CONSIDERS how three key Tibetan Buddhist meditative traditions have understood the nature and value of experience. Now the sense of both the English word "experience" and its Tibetan analogues ranges fairly broadly—from mundane perception, to participation in meaningful events, gaining of empirical knowledge, undergoing of intense sensations, and even direct perception of religious truth. But we can say at least that there has been a tendency, certainly in the West since Descartes, to assume that our experience is known to us self-transparently. We in the West have also long assumed that direct meditative experience of ultimate truths is what Buddhist enlightenment is all about. Yet for Tibetan authors, experience turns out to be complex at best, controversial and dangerous at worst. The relation between Tibetan Buddhist notions of enlightenment and experience is not at all clear, and not only because we haven't studied the texts sufficiently. Tibetan authors themselves betray a

1 I would like to thank Ed Casey, Deborah Gewertz, and Robert Sharf for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this essay.
telling ambivalence about experience, and one of the things this ambivalence tells is their sense that experience, in all of its varieties, is itself recalcitrantly undecidable. But there is also a refreshing palpability in Tibetan characterizations of experience, and its thematization in this literature marks one of the places where doctrinal absolutes, in intercourse with the actualities of religious practice, begin to come undone.

This project takes as its starting point a set of important but sometimes problematic essays by Robert Sharf on experience in Buddhism (1993, 1995, 1998). Sharf argues that the supposed cardinal role of experience in Buddhism, of which we often read, is a western myth rather than representing the fact of the matter. Drawing largely on East Asian sources, Sharf takes to task writers like D.T. Suzuki who touted the centrality of meditative experience in Zen Buddhism when that was, in reality, largely unknown. Instead, Sharf shows, the idea of unmediated meditative experience in Zen and elsewhere in Buddhism came from the western mentors of modern Asian apologists, not to mention the projections of western scholars of Buddhism operating within the same episteme.

I would like to begin by submitting that this argument does not accurately characterize the idea of meditative experience in Tibetan Buddhism. Whatever might be the case for East Asian Buddhism, a concept of meditative experience is well known in many branches of Tibetan Buddhism and certainly was known long before any westerner or modern Asian wrote anything about it. Tibetan Buddhists' ideas and practices concerning experience are solidly based on those of their mentors, no, not from the West, but rather from Indian Buddhism, although it seems that, for reasons that deserve reflection at some other time, Tibetans came up with important clarifications and a salient set of rubrics that are not attested in Indian literature.

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2 I certainly concur with Sharf's point in general, but his argument begins to lose credibility when he attributes Nishida's talk of "neither subject nor object; knowledge and its object are entirely one" (1995:248) seemingly entirely to the influence of figures like William James. While James was surely an important figure for Nishida, it is difficult to believe that Nishida was not also informed by the central themes of immediacy and the collapse of subject-object distinction in Mahāyāna Buddhist soteriology.

3 Gyatso 1998 shows similarly how the writing of autobiography in Tibet is also indebted to a distinctively Tibetan interest in experience. Halbfass: 378-402 argues that in classical Indian philosophy experience was not usually considered to be intrinsically veridical, as has been suggested by neo-Hindu writers (but see Śaṅkara's association of experience (anubhava) with brahman [389]). Anubhava or a variant thereof sometimes denotes experience in Indian Buddhist epistemology, and is often translated by Tib. nyams-myong or myong-ba. Verbs formed from the root bhuj often denote tantric experiencing in Indic literature. Sukha and other particular experiences are especially important to Indian Buddhist tantra, but I am not aware of an Indic analogue to nyams, the special concept for meditative experience discussed in this article. For an Indian Buddhist critique of ordinary experience as a valid source of knowledge, see Poussin: 58.
This article will focus largely on these Tibetan notions of experience along with several important threads shared by Tibetan and Indian Buddhist tantra. Drawing for the most part on written sources, I will examine three influential traditions in Tibet that have been very much concerned with experience: Mahāmudrā ("Great Gesture"), a meditative tradition with roots in India but which developed distinctive ideas about experience in Tibet; the Direct Vision branch of Dzogchen (rdzogs-chen, "Great Perfection") which may represent a uniquely Tibetan synthesis; and the four initiation rites of the "unexcelled" (anuttara) class of tantras, which are entirely a product of Indian Buddhism but were maintained avidly in Tibet, where they were fundamental to the operation of its religious institutions.

The continuities in these three distinct but interrelated traditions will allow me to conclude in agreement with what I see as Sharf's most significant point (even though I take issue with him on several other counts along the way). Sharf's argument that private, nondiscursive, immediate experience is not to be found at the heart of Buddhist practice does largely hold true for Tibetan Buddhist practice as well, even if some theoretical writings seem to suggest otherwise. Indeed, in contrast to the way that claims of private, unmediated religious experience have often served as a strategic device to preserve autonomy and immunity to scientific scrutiny (Proudfoot), claims of experience in the Tibetan Buddhist context are mediated by a variety of signs, signs made possible precisely by experience's own mediated (and mediating) nature. Such signs and expressions render the virtuoso's experience subject not only to a kind of scrutiny but even to the participation of disciples, colleagues, and patrons. But if private, nondiscursive, immediate experience cannot be said to be at the heart of Tibetan Buddhism, this is not to argue that there is no notion of experience at the heart of Tibetan Buddhism at all; quite the contrary. And while this Tibetan idea of experience is rightly said to be incongruous with a Cartesian sort of mind-body dualism, we can notice an affinity with other, more recent strands in western theorizations of experience, strands that scholars of Buddhism may not have considered, but which allow a more appropriate characterization of Tibetan Buddhist practice than do models of experience that confine it to an idealistic mental tower.

But let me first consider a few of Sharf's more specific claims. Most basically, there is indeed a traditional and key notion in Tibetan Buddhism that corresponds, more or less, to what the term "experience" signifies in English. The Tibetan case is thus unlike the Japanese one upon which Sharf focusses. As this article will certainly show, the principal lexemes for meditative or religious experience are in place in some of the earliest
indigenous Tibetan writings on Buddhism and continue to hold that place throughout Tibetan Buddhist history.

Sharf's further claim that writing from personal experience is rare in Buddhism is also contravened by the Tibetan case. 4 Personal religious experience is often the focus of a variety of kinds of autobiographical genres that present a first-person account of dreams, meditative sensations, visions, and insights (Gyatso 1998). Even theoretical and systematic discussions of the Buddhist path such as will be the focus of this paper are, contra Sharf, sometimes said to be based upon the author's personal experiences. 5

But if it is undeniable that a substantial testimonial as well as a theoretical literature concerning meditative experience has long been operative in Tibet, a third question that Sharf raises—about the degree to which such experience is actually sought in practice—is more difficult to answer precisely. Sharf here joins a number of other Buddhologists and anthropologists who would correct the mistaken impression that "what Buddhists do" is to meditate and who maintain instead that Buddhists cultivate experience in meditation far less frequently than has commonly been supposed (1995:241ff.; cf. Faure). This is the case for virtually all Tibetan Buddhists, who occupy the greater part of their time in ritual assemblies, monastic administration, academic study, the production of religious texts and implements, and various kinds of menial labor. And yet this important revision of western presumptions about Buddhist practice should not be taken to the extreme, to suggest that Buddhists do not also sometimes seek what they take to be religiously salvific experience through meditation and other practices. At least in Tibet, the tradition of meditative retreat promulgated in practice academies (sgrub-grva, as distinct from intellectual learning academies, shes-grva) as well as in the proverbial mountain cave has long been a viable option that a certain, if relatively small, segment of both the clerical and lay populations took advantage of—and still is actively doing so today, both in exile and even in Chinese-occupied Tibet. The inhabitants of such caves and retreat centers, be they in residence for a few weeks, for the classic three-year retreat, or even for

4 (1995:235ff); Sharf wants to exclude tantric writings from his argument since he thinks they are not representative of mainstream Buddhism. Not only does this position misrepresent tantric Buddhism, it is also tantamount to excluding all of Tibetan Buddhism from a discussion of mainstream Buddhism.

5 For example, Longchenpa writes at the end of J: "[I,] Dri-med 'Od-zer, collected the nectar of the key points of my own experience in practice (nyams-len), explained it clearly for the benefit of future generations, and put it together well on the ridge of Gangs-ri Thod-dkar." Tsong-kha-pa, one of the authors mentioned by Sharf (1995:236), attributes the path he describes to the meditative experience of rNgo Blo-id-lan Shes-rab, referring diffidently to himself as a mere "renunciant monk who has heard a lot" (U: 520a-521a).
life, engage in a variety of practices, some of which are directly focused upon the cultivation of meditative experience and the attainment of classically defined stages of the path. Moreover, a number of special literary genres are structured expressly as manuals to be used by practitioners in retreat. While systematic ethnographic study remains to be carried out, it is clear that these manuals were and still are used by those religious specialists who enter retreat and actively endeavor to cultivate the valued experiences in the recommended way. Such texts were not just left lying around for show, like, say, Jane Fonda's Workout Book on one's coffee table.

Persons famed for their outstanding expertise and devotion to meditative practices were respected in Tibet as "experienced" virtuosi (Samuel). It is also widely said that an essential qualification to be a teacher of meditation is to have had meditative experiences oneself (D: 2a-3b). The reverence with which such teachers were held, and the spiritual and temporal power that some were accorded, demonstrates, moreover, how much meditative experience represented an important cultural ideal.

We can dispense then with the questions of whether Tibetan Buddhists write about, or attempt to have, their own meditative experiences. Assuming the answer to both of these questions to be a qualified yes, we might occupy ourselves instead with the more interesting, if more complicated, question of what Tibetan Buddhist notions of experience actually signify in their own contexts, not to mention how such notions might compare with ideas about experience in the West. Our findings should bear even upon what has already been said in the preceding, for the very distinction between meditation and other types of practice as regards the role of experience may not be ultimately defensible; it certainly should not be assumed with Sharf, for example, that ritual performance or chanting necessarily spell a neglect of experience (1995:244-246). Nor can we in any event draw a strict line between meditation and ritual performance—especially in the case of tantric Buddhism with its elaborately structured visualizations, which, as will be shown, are sometimes supposed precisely to elicit kinds of experiences. But before going further, some terminological information is in order.

**TIBETAN TERMS FOR EXPERIENCE**

If it is true, as Sharf maintains, that the prominence of terms for experience like *keiken* and *taiken* in Japanese religious and philosophical literature is a recent phenomenon reflecting modern western influence (1993; 1995), the same cannot be said of Tibetan literature. Tibetan Buddhist texts have long known two principal lexemes for experience, which roughly correspond to the semantic range of two main senses of "experi-
ence" as it is used in English and understood in western theoretical discourse. The first of these, myong-ba (pronounced “nyong-wa”), is often used as a verb. It occurs widely in both colloquial and technical contexts to refer to a range of activities, from the reception of sense data, to the accumulation of knowledge based on what has been personally witnessed or performed, to the participation in an exalted state such as primordial consciousness (H: 271b) or the taste of bliss-emptiness (E: 3.385-386). It is also an auxiliary verb that creates a kind of past perfect. *Lha sa la ’gro myong*, lit., “I have experienced going to Lhasa,” makes the point that I have been to Lhasa at some time in the past. Myong-ba is thus often synonymous with the English “to experience” in the sense of directly encountering or participating in something, leading to a kind of empirical knowledge not unlike what is expressed by the German *Erfahrung* (Gadamer: 346ff.). While myong-ba would lack the scientific implications of this German counterpart, it does indicate the acquisition of empirical certainty.

Nyams (pronounced “nyam”) is the other pertinent Tibetan lexeme and is a noun. It has a narrower range than myong-ba, as it is usually limited to technical religious discourse. When nyams is a member of a compound, it often seems to refer to a subjective state, here sharing some of the sense of the German *Erlebnis* as Gadamer has defined it (60-72). The common phrase *nyams-su len-pa* means literally to “take into one’s experience,” a metaphor for the sort of religious learning or practice that is assimilated into one’s entire life, as opposed to the mere memorization of doctrines or mouthing of litanies.

Another frequently used compound, *nyams-myong* (or, *nyams-su myong-ba*), could be translated “to experience in one’s experience,” where again nyams refers to a kind of subjectivity. Combining the two principal Tibetan lexemes for experience, nyams-myong is a very general term that can denote anything from the kinds of experiencing that occur by virtue of religious realization to the conventional states of such deluded denizens of samsāra as hell-dwellers (A: 113.785). Having the valorized, meditative kinds of nyams-myong is a key criterion for someone to be recognized as a qualified teacher of religion. The term is often invoked in polemical rhetoric: “my lineage of masters have profound experience; the other lineages are just spouting words” (P: 39-40). *Nyams-myong* indicates a certain depth: the problem with those who lack it is that their knowledge or understanding is too superficial; they have not thoroughly integrated the teachings of religion into every aspect of their existence.

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6 The other meaning of *nyams*, “to deteriorate,” seems unrelated to its sense as experience, although sometimes Tibetan commentators play on it to point up the unreliability of unrealized experience.
Nyams also occurs on its own. Then it names a special meditative experience discussed by Tibetan authors and seems to have no analogue in Indic literature. On its own, nyams seems to refer to the content, the what that is being experienced, rather than the subjective space that the term indicates when it is a member of a compound. This is not to say that there is implied a fixed and standardized referent for each of the types of nyams that are defined. On the contrary, these types are said to be only roughly distinguished, since different people will have very different kinds and degrees of nyams experiences. (S: 276; R: 231). Thus nyams serves really as a general term for the wide range of experiential events that occur when the subject enters a state of focussed meditation. The most commonly defined trio of nyams—bliss (bde-ba), clarity (gsal-ba), and no-thought (mi-rtog-pa)—name the qualitative content of the three main kinds of absorbed meditative states. Another trio sometimes mentioned in the literature—movement, attainment, and stability—describe the degree of durability of such meditative experiences as they develop—from intermittent rushes to solid, all-absorbing states (T: 251). Nyams would especially seem to be about the “object phase” (Casey 1976)—the what that is being experienced, as opposed to the subjective side of the experience—when it is used to refer to the array of apparitions that sometime dawn in meditation, as will be seen below in the Direct Vision tradition.

Yet in the end there remains a vacillation in the conceptualization of nyams between aligning it with the subject of an experience and with an objective content. Such ambiguity issues out of the very nature of such experiences themselves: the subject of bliss is himself blissful, the subject of an experience of clarity is herself clear, and so on. We might say that experience bridges subject and object, a bridging that will become a leitmotif in this paper. Perhaps most importantly, the tendency for subject and object to reflect each other and thereby to become blurred in salient, absorbed states of meditation serves to link nyams experiences with the highest goal of Tibetan Buddhist meditative traditions, namely, the collapse of all subject-object dualism altogether. This in turn explains, or so I would argue, why these traditions were so interested in cultivating nyams experiences in the first place.

When distinction between subject and object dissolves entirely, however, it is usually not labelled with any of the terms for experience discussed thus far but rather is cast as an enlightened realization, often

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7 Note that S has been translated into English (Namgyal), but it is frequently unreliable and technical terms are not rendered consistently.
8 But in the phrase, nyams-su snang-ba, a distinction is still suggested between the apparition itself (snang-ba), which is the experienced content, and nyams, which is the place, or the subjective context, for that apparition.
termed *rtogs.* Nyams in particular is, in fact, frequently contrasted with *rtogs*, especially in the Mahāmudrā literature, where meditative experiences are sometimes said to precede, but in themselves to be bereft of realization, and hence they are sometimes denigrated in this literature (E: 3.385). But the same texts suggest an important affinity between the two, claiming that there is no realization without experience (S: 278, 324). Importantly, realization is specified, at least by one commentator, to have an intrinsic experiential component (*rang-nyams*) (S: 322, 285). In other words, sometimes experience is deluded, sometimes it marks enlightened realization. One verse asserts wryly, “The three, bliss, clarity, and no-thought, these three are the deviations of meditation. The three, bliss, clarity, and no-thought, these three are the pinnacles of meditation” (S: 286). In short, some writers conflate experience and realization at the exalted end of the spectrum, but others seem to want to hold out an ideal preserve where the complete collapse of subject-object distinction finally obviates any talk of experience. I find, however, that this preserve recedes the more our sources are scrutinized. Thus I want to suggest that the realization named by *rtogs* and other terms should properly be considered special varieties of enlightened experiences themselves. But in any event, the ideals of Buddhist realization will be secondary to this article, which is more interested in the virtues of the partial merging of subject and object that experience facilitates when it is less than enlightened, that is, *before* that salvific elimination of all heterogeneity and ambivalence.

The many ambiguities in Tibetan conceptions of experience do make terminological precision difficult. This is only exacerbated by the semantic ambiguity of the English “experience.” Nonetheless, in the discussion that follows I will be as consistent as possible. I can be completely consistent in using the word “realization” to represent the Tibetan *rtogs*, but my use of “experience” must be less clearcut. In representing technical Tibetan discussions, most occurrences of the word, unless indicated otherwise, will refer to salient meditative experiences, for that is what the sources we are

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9 The history of the term *rtogs* and the concept it names deserve more study. In the compound *mgon-rtogs*, it translates the key Sanskrit term *abhisamaya*. But on its own it can correspond to several Sanskrit sememes, including bodh, ava-gam, or prati-vid. It occurs sometimes in the tantric four initiation tradition, as when it translates *gatah* (Orofino: 41, 60), regarding the unmoving realization of the third initiation. *rtogs* seems to become a key concept only in Tibetan literature, and especially in the Mahāmudrā.

10 Martin, in claiming that for his sources realization is not an experience (245), fails to notice the many passages in those sources that show experience to be intrinsic to realization. He also misrepresents the sense of a quote from Gampopa (nn. 13-14).

11 When subject and object are experienced (*myong*) as two, it is experience (*nyams*), but when it dawns without any object, it is realization. When the mind experiences (*myong*), it is experience (*nyams*); when it dawns as mind’s own nature, it is realization (D: 112a).
considering are most concerned with. In these contexts verbal forms of “to experience” will usually stand for some form of myong-ba, and the noun “experience” in the sense of a discrete state (usually signalled by a definite article or the plural form) will translate nyams and will also refer to particular meditative experiences like bliss. But I will also use the noun “experience” to represent a more general concept of experience as such, not as a reification but simply on the model of, say, formulating a theory of bodily movement based on one’s reading of a group of texts that analyse and prescribe types of bodily movements. In fact, the Tibetan word nyams-myong, as well as other words such as myong-ba used as a noun, themselves sometimes serve as umbrella terms to indicate the broad phenomenon of “having experiences in one’s experience,” of which meditative experiences are merely well consummated instances (cf. S: 284-286). Indeed, semantically nyams-myong quite nicely combines the senses of having direct empirical knowledge and having self-conscious subjectivity which the English term in its most general uses also can combine; and as already noted, nyams-myong also spans in its denotation both meditatively cultivated states and those of everyday life. This is not to say, however, that the concept named by nyams-myong is thematized in as salient fashion as are certain other concepts in Tibetan Buddhism; it is only on the grounds of my own suggestion that the notion of realization should be joined with nyams-myong to constitute a larger Tibetan concept of experience that we can rightly say this is a primary category in the traditions under discussion.

Even more slippage yet is to be expected when one ventures to employ western philosophical notions of experience to help unpack the Tibetan ones. But if the Tibetan notion of experience is at best only fairly coherent across its lexical variations and traditions of meditative practice, there is no unanimity in our western sources either regarding in what precisely the heterogeneous phenomenon of experience consists. All the more reason, then, for getting into the thick of the matter.

STIMULATING EXPERIENCE

Although stock meditation theory in early Buddhism allowed that feelings of pleasure or bliss accompany meditative concentration, such bliss was said to fall away as meditation progresses into the deepest states of concentration. But certain Buddhist scriptures later came to promote bliss to the level of the ultimate, as when it was made a quality of the innate element of buddhahood (tathāgatagarbha). This metaphysical attribution was matched in popular devotional forms of Buddhism by descriptions of heavens such as Sukhāvatī, Land of Bliss, the paradise of the Buddha Amitābha. But even the Mahāyāna story of the female beauty Vasumitrā,
who leads beings to enlightenment by kissing or embracing them (Cleary: 146-149), hardly anticipated the systematic cultivation of “great bliss” through sexual yoga and other techniques in Buddhism’s tantric phase, the phase in which the traditions to be studied in this article developed.

In fact, all three of the main meditative experiences listed by Tibetan authors—bliss, clarity, and no-thought—have important precedents in Indic Buddhist doctrines, especially in the “third turning of the wheel” and tantric traditions. The notion of clarity can even be linked to early Buddhist notions about the natural luminescence of the mind (*prakṛti prabhāsvaratā*) (Ruegg: 411-418). But it is especially the valorization of bliss that becomes emblematic of the tantric project to invert certain threads in earlier Buddhism, most specifically its doctrine that sexual pleasure is inseparable from attachment and suffering and therefore to be avoided through celibacy. In contrast, tantric Buddhists, following a trend already under way in some branches of the Mahāyāna—personified especially well by the famous sage Vimalakīrti—to reject all conceptions of enlightenment that excluded any activity or state of mind, sought enlightenment within desire and attachment rather than without them. In tantra such a path of transgression and inclusion proceeds most (in)famously within sexual bliss. This, ironically, is thought to deliver the practitioner from those very grasping desires. As one saying goes, tantra uses more fire to heal a burn on the body, or more water to flush out water caught in the ear (Snellgrove 1959: 1.93; J: 99; V: 26b).

One of the key ways that experiences such as bliss facilitate this salvific purpose is by serving as the arena in which a realization can be made. It is precisely our tendency to become attached to something like sexual bliss that makes it in fact the supreme test for such a realization: if one can have the mindfulness to realize that the sexual pleasure one is experiencing is empty, one would likely have the capacity to realize everything else as empty as well. But the fact that something like bliss is being used to cultivate a realization of its emptiness allows an important observation about the nature of the experiences that are cultivated in tantric practice: they are not simply sensations. The point is made repeatedly that the bliss felt in such practices is to be experienced as something—as the enlightenment, or the bodies, of the buddha, or as space, or intelligence, or as “instantaneously arisen,” or simply as bliss-emptiness, the most common theme in Tibetan sources. Thus a cultivated experience like tantric bliss is something that is interpreted, or mediated, if you will. The fact that meditative experience is itself mediated will emerge as another leitmotif of this article, in addition to such an experience’s active function to be a bridge—or to mediate—between other things, as noted earlier.

Now in order for the realization of the empty nature of one’s bliss to take place, one needs to have some bliss, and have it in focus. But despite
our chronic attachment to blissful sensation it is not the case that such sensation is always available. In fact, the flip side of the tendency to gorge oneself on what gives one pleasure, according to fourteenth-century Tibetan exegete Longchenpa, can be an exhaustion of energy and the ability to feel (K: 92). This is especially so for the subtle bliss that accompanies meditative concentration, which is an appropriately rarified and unencumbered kind of experience for the realization of emptiness, yet not easy to achieve. Longchenpa maintains that it eludes many practitioners; hence the development of special techniques to evoke it.

This leads to yet a third general point about meditative experience in the traditions under discussion: not only does it 1) bridge other things and 2) need to be interpreted itself; 3) meditative experience must be cultivated in the first place. (We might say then that Tibetan Buddhist meditative experience is triply mediate: by virtue of mediating between poles such as subject and object, by virtue of being mediated itself by Buddhist doctrines like emptiness, and by virtue of having to be facilitated by particular techniques in order to be there at all.) The techniques that are employed to bring forth experience often involve the use of images. Images are the central device of śādhanā practice, the most common kind of tantric meditation, which proceeds through a series of steps whereby practitioners visualize themselves becoming buddhas. In the course of such a process special images are sometimes manipulated expressly to evoke meditative experiences. Longchenpa even argues that such images—which he glosses as “signs”—are required if there is to be experience (nyams-myong); a path that does not use them will lack experience (J: 20).

Longchenpa provides a detailed overview of techniques to evoke the three meditative experiences, whereby the practitioner visualizes certain images and thinks they are infusing the body with bliss, or clarity, or no-thought. For example, the practitioner sees a fire blazing from the navel up to the top of the head, from which drip down drops of nectar, filling the body; the practitioner continues to concentrate on these images until an experience of bliss has arisen (J: 12; K: 81-83). The most provocative images that are used to evoke experiences, of course, are those related to sexual yoga, one of the methods highlighted by Longchenpa as a means to increase and enhance meditative experiences, especially for the average practitioner who lacks the talents of the best yogins who can bypass such elaborate practices (K: 107-9). Sexual yoga is complex and requires much more discussion than will be possible in this article, although I will allude to it again below. But we can note at least in this context the role of the image, especially in those cases—which, incidentally, are most common in Tibetan practice—when this yoga is performed in the imagination, rather than with an “actual” real live partner. This is how Longchenpa
describes the technique, where a "mental consort" is imagined in great
detail in order to facilitate a blissful experience. Images are employed lib-
erally in the tantric initiation rite as well, as when a small painting of a
woman's body (I am repeating the androcentric bias of our uniformly het-
erosexual sources) is displayed to the practitioner. But even in the classic
sources that speak of the participation of an actual consort, there is an
awareness of the potency of the figure of the woman's body as such, which
simultaneously evokes desire and indicates the intense experience that
awaits him when sexual yoga is actually undertaken. As she herself an-
nounces as she points to her own body during the rite, “Ema! My lotus
here is the abode of all bliss” (R: 228; cf. Snellgrove 1959: 1.96).

MAKING EXPERIENCE CONCRETE

The tantric use of the mediating device of images, imagined or actual,
deliberately to stimulate meditative experiences allows me to make a fur-
ther point about the notion of experience in the traditions we are study-
ing here. The concrete nature of such devices reflects something about the
kind of experience that is sought: the experience itself should be sturdy,
salient, and resistant to dissipation. Again, the paradigmatic example of
this principle may be taken from tantric sexual yoga, the climactic mo-
ment of which is a gathering of seminal fluids in the area of the sexual
organ, although their emission often is either avoided or drawn back (K:
109-110; Kvaerne:113).12 Instead, the taste of bliss is retained, savored as
bliss-emptiness and so forth, before it is finally raised up the central yogic
channel and distributed throughout the body. This retention does not
seem mainly to be motivated by a desire to reserve energy, as in Taoist sex-
ual practices (van Gulik). Rather, it serves to cultivate a robust experience
that can be subjected to the critical gaze of the practitioner who is to re-
alize the experience to be empty. If allowed to dissipate, the experience
would be lost and with it the opportunity to catch sight of its emptiness.

A strategy to cultivate robust experience is even more overt in the
Tibetan Mahāmudrā tradition, which does not employ concrete images,
however, much less the controversial techniques of tantric sexual yoga.
Mahāmudrā is an outgrowth of late Indian tantric Buddhism but in the
form in which it developed in Tibet—particularly the stream that was
introduced into Tibet by Marpa the Translator in the eleventh century
and systematized in the twelfth century by Gampopa—it focussed almost
exclusively on certain simplified, Ch’ān-like iconoclastic techniques
already developing in the Indic sūtras (E: 3.386). Mahāmudrā in Tibet

12 Cf. n. 15 below.
became especially associated with an outstanding tradition of meditative retreat, and its exeges produced some of the most explicit discussions of experience—usually systematized as the trio of bliss, clarity, and no-thought—in Tibetan literature. These sources instantiate in greater detail the general observations we have already ventured about the mediate nature of this sort of experience: its function to bridge, its need to be interpreted, and its need to be cultivated in the first place.

As in tantric sexual yoga, bliss in Mahāmudrā is a somatic feeling, although sensations of mental bliss, such as a sense of pervasive happiness or confidence, are counted in this category as well. Clarity experiences consist in states of alert lucidity, when the mind seems to be transparent like glass. Clarity is said to elicit spontaneous extrasensory perceptions, such as what is happening in another place, or what another person is thinking; it can also bring about a manifestation of apparitions, usually visual, the standard examples of which are images of smoke, dots of light, fireflies, and mirages. Finally, the category of no-thought experiences seems to refer to the quality of immersion as such, a palpable feeling of absorption in a state in which even subtle thoughts dissolve, after which no thoughts arise whatever (D: 112a-113a; S: 276-277). All three kinds of experiences are said to be intense and absorbing—sing-nge-ba, as Tibetan onomatopoeia has it, an expression repeatedly resorted to in this literature. Such an experience is ineffable, but this does not here have the grand soteriological import that the attribute of ineffability does elsewhere in Buddhist theory: instead it simply refers to the experience's all-pervasive, non-objectifiable quality. Zhang Rinpoche writes, “There will never be a word for such an experience. It dawns without reason like a dream.” (Martin: 270). Another writer compares such experience to the unspeakable, all-absorbing sensations that arise when one is drunk, or when a youth feels bliss, or when strong feelings of bliss or hatred arise, or what it is like when a yogi wanders in the market and his head spins with desire for objects (N: 37-38).

If these experiences are unarticulable and all-pervasive, they are not diffuse or indeterminate. Rather, experiences crystallize and achieve concrecence. Zhang Rinpoche writes, “Like a beautiful flower in a rainfall, it stands out with a shining clear presence against the ground. . . . It is, like a bronze bowl full of water, transparent within and without” (Martin: 270). Milarepa is supposed by Gampopa to have used the metaphor of fruition for those experiences that are conjoined with realization, saying that realization without such experience would be like a tree trunk without fruit (S: 285). The more prosaic kinds of meditative experiences are also said to manifest concretely, sedimenting as objects of the six senses (i.e., hallucinations) or as expressive symptoms such as shaking, levitating, laughing,
or crying, experiences to which yogins working with their psychic channels are especially prone (S: 276-277).

As noted earlier, we can detect in these descriptions an interesting ambiguity about the subject and the object of experience. Certainly there seems to be a tendency for the more absorbed experiences to move into the domain of the objective, by which I mean that they become something perceptible to the experiencer, if not to others, as in the last mentioned expressions. On the other hand, there also is a theme of absorbed immersion, an alignment of the subjective aspect of the experience with the what that is being experienced. This mirroring is not necessarily the same as the salvific collapse of all subject-object distinction that is supposed to mark enlightened realization, however; rather, it can merely describe the close alignment of subject and object when any clarified, focussed experience is in play. The Mahāmudrā exegetes note abundantly that a well-cultivated experience does not necessarily culminate in enlightened realization at all, an observation that directly reflects this tradition's ambivalence about the value of meditative experiences altogether.

**THE DANGER IN THE CONCRETE**

It is clear that the Mahāmudrā teachers prefer stable experiences over mercurial ones that disappear as soon as they dawn. In an oft-repeated metaphor, meditative experiences are criticized for being like sun rays that only occasionally peek through the clouds (N: 26-27). The untrustworthy nature of meditative experiences—that is, weak or flawed ones—is one of the primary grounds for distinguishing them from realization, because that, importantly, is lasting, non-deteriorating, and seen vividly and spontaneously (S: 320; D: 124a).

Nonetheless, experience that crystallizes as too concrete an object is also mistrusted and critiqued by these writers. If the experience completely becomes an object, divorced from its subject, it is superficial, lacking in depth and subjective significance, similar to an empty promise. But more troublesome yet, the experience that is an intentional focus of perception (dmigs-gtad) is a likely object of desire. Seizing upon the bliss, the meditator sees it as something to possess, thereby making a dualistic distinction between subject and object (D: 112a, 117a). As in earlier Buddhism, such a distinction made by a dualistically conceptual mind spells delusion, essentialization, distortion, attachment, and bondage (S: 322). Hence, the repeated warning in Mahāmudrā writings that meditators should not become attached to the experiences that arise in them.

But the most important problem with the experience that has become merely an object is that its existence is contingent. If it is already part and
parcel of the subject, that is, if it is an object as opposed to a subject, then such an experience only arises under certain circumstances; it is not always already present. This is what produces anxiety about the presence of experiences and deliberate attempts to make one dawn. But anything that is deliberately constructed is thereby dependent upon such efforts for its existence. Not only is such a constructed object unsatisfactory because of its association with attachment and delusion, then, it is also unsatisfactory for its vulnerability, its proneness to disappear (Martin: 282).

The problem for the Mahāmudrā tradition thus becomes how to cultivate the salvifically beneficial kind of experience—the kind that will be durable enough to be subjected to insight, recognized as empty, and ultimately incorporated into a realization that will never be lost—without rendering that experience a constructed, impermanent, and objectified product. The dilemma closely parallels an old issue in Buddhist theory regarding nirvāṇa, which also, for the very reasons we have just discussed, must be unconstructed and unconditioned. But if it is unconstructed, how can anyone ever cultivate and attain it? The famous “sudden-gradual” debate issues directly from this dilemma, as do a host of other disputes in Buddhism. Mahāmudrā’s solution has affinities to the inclusive approach of the tantras. Instead of discriminating, as the older meditative traditions had required one to do, between states of pure, nonconceptual concentration, on the one hand, and vilified wandering thoughts on the other, Mahāmudrā meditators are to accept and incorporate all states within the orbit of practice. Nothing that arises in meditation is to be rejected but rather is to be “realized” as having as its basic nature the same nature as that of enlightened mind. Such a realization, when finally achieved, obviates the need to construct or pursue any particular state, since all states are of equal value in offering a potential for realization.

The inclusive, nondualistic approach of Mahāmudrā begins to solve the problem of constructedness, but it substitutes another problem, namely, how to distinguish delusion from realization. But this shall not concern us here. What is relevant to the present study is the fact that the experiences discussed above came to be the principal kinds of states that Mahāmudrā included within the orbit of meditation, not only because nothing can be rejected but also because such experiences have special virtues that enhance and bring out realization (D: 118b).

**CONSTRUCTING THE NATURAL**

If Mahāmudrā’s basic orientation is sudden, it still advises (for everyone save the most talented) a gradual set of stages to reach this sudden realization (S: 319; D: 123b-124a). This system, sketched out in a system of
four yogas, appears to be unknown in Indic literature and is attributed to the personal realizations of Gampopa (S: 326). The stages unfold through the medium of meditative experience. This experience serves to habituate realization, coaxing what initially is theoretical into a full incorporation of all states.

During the first yoga the practitioner enters a “one-pointed” state. The assumption, as in older Buddhist systems, is that bliss and other experiences will automatically accompany immersion in concentration; according to Gampopa, such experiences are produced by the force of bodily substances (N: 41). Although meditators are advised not to become attached to these experiences, they are given techniques to sustain (bskyang) the experiences once they occur. Thus the meditator may not exactly be constructing experiences but is certainly providing the conditions for them to dawn and flourish on their own.

Once they do, the meditator is to proceed with the required work. The second yoga, “non-formulatedness,” commences when the meditator has an initial realization of the ultimately empty, or unformulated, nature of a meditative experience. Then follows the critical habituation process, wherein the meditator applies the realization gained about the nature of her meditative experience to all moods, thoughts, appearances, or whatever—not only the salient experiences evoked in the rarefied state of one-pointedness. When anything and everything in life become the arena for realization, it all has “one taste,” and the third yoga has been achieved. The upshot is the fourth yoga, “no meditation,” for it is said that finally no effort or deliberate practice of any kind will be necessary: now everything will be self-realized, nondualistically and automatically (N: 33-45; S: 319-366; D: 123b-133b; Martin).

Certainly by the end of this path the Mahāmudrā exegetes seem to be talking about something that sounds like what western scholars of religion have meant by immediate religious experience (cf. Griffiths). But we must note that despite whatever claims the Mahāmudrā writers are making about the immediacy or spontaneity of the final realization, it is preceded by training and constructed concepts: the meditator learns the categories of the four yogas, tries to see the one taste of everything, and so on. Thus there is no equation here between the ultimate nondualistic realization and a first, raw, untutored, preconceptual kind of immediacy such as a theologian like Schleiermacher valorized as an intuition of the Infinite (41-43, 54). Rather, such first perceptions are already mediated according to most Buddhist theory, influenced by past karma and habitual tendencies. 13 Thus ironically it is only the final result that is said to

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13 The principal dissension to this view in Buddhist philosophy is in Dignāga’s theory of a preconceptual immediacy in the first moment of direct perception. Although his successors may have dis-
be immediate. We might understand this claim in terms of the acquisition of bodily skills, such as the process of learning to ride a bicycle: an awkward set of techniques are practiced with difficulty until certain breakthroughs occur and the skills are mastered, leading finally to a feeling that riding a bike comes naturally (cf. Bergson: 80ff.).

This example of cultivating a bodily habit is in fact eminently appropriate, as the body seems to have a lot to do not only with the dawning of meditative experience in Mahāmudrā but also its conception of realization. The Mahāmudrā four yogas describe a process of incorporation, whereby what begins as an intellectual understanding of the general meaning of what one is to practice leads to an unfolding of felt experience and ultimately to a deep realization that is itself sometimes conceived with a somatic metaphor, as when realization is said to have been brought into the “belly of the mind” (blo-khog). This transformation is illustrated in terms of a person who first hears about the Buddhist pilgrimage site of Bodhgaya, India, and has but a general anticipatory image of it. When he arrives on the scene, he gains a rough impression of the place. Finally he becomes familiar with its layout in detail (S: 320-321). Incidentally, and in view of Sharf’s dismissal of Suzuki’s notion of “Zen” experience as an imitation of the ideals of western philosophers like William James, I would point out how nicely this sixteenth-century Tibetan example anticipates James’s example of a trip to Harvard’s Memorial Hall to demonstrate how a prior, general conception comes to be fulfilled in the more detailed experience of actually visiting a place (55ff.).

For the Mahāmudrā practitioner, “becoming familiar” is a metaphor for the specialized and intimate self-reflexivity of final realization. This reflexivity is said to be a direct perception, but it is an odd, nonintentional kind of perception, for it perceives mind’s “own-characteristic” (D: 112a). The meditator is to become self-conscious within experience by looking directly at/within the immersed “sing-nge-ba” experience itself. It is precisely this reflexivity that is thought to obviate—now in the salvific, complete sense—the subject and object distinction, for whatever has emerged as an experience is recognized as a self-manifestation of awareness itself. The meditator stays hrig-ge (another Tibetan onomatopoeia) in her own-manifestation, adding nothing, neither antidote to get rid of it nor interpretation to establish its meaning. This experience is like the arc of the sky in the middle of an autumn day, with nothing established, yet nothing obliterated (N: 41-43; D: 124a).

The Mahāmudrā idea that realization will dawn together with experience is probably to be attributed to this self-absorbed quality of realiza-
tion's reflexivity. The pervasive interpenetration of subject and object suggests a kind of self-touching that is perhaps most readily thematized and discerned as experience. Again, we can note how the automatic alignment of subject and object that occurs in absorbed states of experience is capitalized upon for Buddhist soteriological purposes. The Mahāmudrā exegetes even go so far as to attribute to enlightened consciousness an "own-experience," which, as would be expected, is blissful, clear, and lacking thought (Martin: 267; S: 276-284). This legitimizes experience once and for all, for now it reflects the actual situation of enlightened awareness (D: 124b). Experiences in which there is attachment or grasping are merely deviations from that enlightened awareness. Nonetheless, even these denigrated kinds of experiences have some association with the metaphysical reality. It is this inherent association that facilitates the transformation of the experience that the meditator merely learned to see as empty into the empty enlightened experience that has always already been there. It is like a child meeting its mother again, the texts often say. To improve upon our own example of learning to ride a bike, we could consider instead the fledgling chick, who needs to learn how to fly but has the advantage of having already been born with wings.

EXPERIENCE MANIFESTED

The Tibetan Dzogchen tradition pushes even further the palpable perceptibility of experience that is part and parcel of realization's reflexivity. But just as much, it refuses to characterize such a perceivable, realized experience as an object. Cousins of Mahāmudrā, Dzogchen meditative traditions were well-established in Tibet by the eleventh century, but a definitive source in Indian Buddhism is difficult to demonstrate. Scholars now think that Dzogchen represents a set of innovative Tibetan appropriations of practices that were entering Tibet from a variety of sources (Germano; Karmay; Jackson: 28-30). I will focus here upon what has come to be considered the pinnacle of Dzogchen practice, the Direct Vision (thod-rgal, lit., "leaping to the top") meditations. This esoteric visionary tradition is known in some of the oldest Nyingma scriptures and in early Bon sources as well. In the practices of Direct Vision, experiences have a featured role (G: 303-305, ch.20; Dudjom: 337-343).

As in Mahāmudrā, Direct Vision practices are performed by serious meditators in retreat, a tradition that continues today, in both exile and in Tibet itself. Direct Vision shares with Mahāmudrā and tantra a metaphysics of enlightened awareness, here called the "ground." Ground awareness is often defined as being primordially pure by nature, spontaneously productive in its way of being, and pervasively compassionate (L).
The second point is most pertinent to our concerns here. The fact that
ground awareness is always producing spontaneously means that it has
inherent “display energy” (cf. D: 113a). Ground awareness is continually
expressive. Its expressions, or manifestations, are discerned as apparitions,
which in some contexts are called experiences (nyams).

The manifestations of the ground are said only to become evident to
the virtuoso yogi, although in a general sense every appearance or phe-
nomenon of worldly life is considered a product of the ground’s expres-
sivity, even if it is an expression gone amok (L: chs.2-3). But it is in-
structive that only the manifestations of exalted states of meditation are
actually labelled experiences, reflecting the belief that only these special
manifestations are self-conscious. In contrast, the blind and automatic
manifestations of deluded samsaric minds are perceived merely as external
objects, their self-reflexive experientiality ignored.

The valued Direct Vision meditative experiences are classed as clarity;
there is little mention of bliss or no-thought experiences. The tradition
makes a point of distinguishing between such clarity experiences that
are constructed and genuine Direct Vision apparitions. The former, tell-
ingly, are mere mental experiences (shes-nyams), which can be produced by
deliberate concentration techniques or bodily exercises; they are often
expressed by dancing, singing, or other kinds of pleasurable, absorbed ac-
tivity (G: 2.226ff.).

In contrast, the genuine “experiences that appear” (snang-nyams)
are said to manifest spontaneously without engineering of any kind (B: 125.53; L: 390ff.; Q: 558ff.) These highly esoteric experiences are believed
to dawn in a series of visions by virtue of which ground awareness makes
itself apparent to the advanced practitioner as a directly perceived reality.
As the ground breaks through into the “outer field,” experiences increase
in the form of various kinds of visual displays. Finally, all deluded mani-
festations subside forever, replaced by a self-conscious manifestation of a
buddha-body. This manifestation, closely reminiscent of the buddhalogy
of a Mahāyāna work like Ratnagotravibhāga, produces countless appari-
tions and displays, like a moon reflected in the water, that work to teach
others (G: 2.219ff.; Dudjom: 337ff.).

In emphasizing the perceptibility of this odd species of manifested
experience, the Direct Vision exegetes even go so far as to connect it with
the more conventional types of perception described in Buddhist episte-
mology. In this they would seem to concur with some western theorists
of religion (Proudfoot) who also have wanted to understand religious
experience as continuous with mundane kinds of experience, in con-
tradistinction to other theorists who see religious experience as an entirely
different affair, since it lacks an intentional object (Forman). But if the
Direct Vision exegetes grant a basic affinity between the two types of perception, they also insist that the valorized perception lacks subject-object distinction. In this way it differs from “veiled” perception, in which there is a distinct object that is an impure, karmic manifestation. In “ultimate” perception, the seen manifestations—colors, patterns, buddha images, manādalas—are pure. They are pure because they are constituted by light rather than by the material sedimentations of karmic traces, in this way avoiding the fully physical concretizations of experience such as will be seen in a moment in tantric practice.

Indeed, the apparitions of Direct Vision are not thought of as objects at all. Rather, they are an “own-radiation,” a radiation made possible by special subtle psycho-physical channels connecting basic awareness to the physical body, which are activated only in the virtuoso practitioner (G: 2. 222). The notion of own-radiation once again indicates the reflexivity of such perception, such that what is perceived cannot be said to be an object separate from the subject. Rather, we could say, it is the subject fully unfolded by virtue of a special species of experience that is no longer confined to a private interiority. Experience here is neither solely mental nor solely physical; rather the two poles are linked by virtue of a physiology that connects ground awareness to the body.

Although there is a shared insistence on the effortlessness and spontaneity of the final fruit, Direct Vision differs from Mahāmudrā in where it positions experiences with respect to that result. While Mahāmudrā practitioners cultivate meditative experiences at the early stages of the path and use them as an arena for the winning of, and therefore in some sense the cause of, realization, Direct Vision makes experiences the result of realization. All deliberate acts to cultivate or interpret have already occurred prior to undertaking Direct Vision practice, because that is permitted only after the meditator has attained stability in the “view,” that is, the metaphysical doctrine that proclaims any and all phenomena to be apparitions, the self-radiation of ground awareness. Thus if the meditator becomes attached to an experience, it means that she is not having a Direct Vision experience: if she sees it as separate from herself, she has not attained stability in the view. We might, then, analogize the valued Direct Vision experience to a burst of delighted, spontaneous laughter at the irony in a complicated joke—the presumptions of which require an elaborate prior education in order to be appreciated.

14 Note that, nonetheless, the Direct Vision path is said to be gradual and to require diligence, in contrast to the sudden realization of its counterpart, the “Cutting Through” path, which is for lazy but intelligent practitioners (L: 365; Q: 572-573; Thondup: 67). This may have to do with the fact that Direct Vision engages physical matter as such, ultimately accomplishing the difficult, if supreme, feat of rendering it into light. See Karmay: 193, 213-214.
What is especially distinctive about the Direct Vision view of experience is that when it is perfected, it crystallizes outwardly. This is not to say that such experiences are no longer seen to be subjective, for they entail the same reflexivity that is central to Mahāmudrā realization. Indeed, even to characterize the Direct Vision experiences as outward is problematic, for there is no longer a meaningful distinction to be made between what is inner and outer. Nonetheless, the Direct Tradition possesses key terms distinguishing inner and outer fields, manifestations, and so on, and there is no doubt that it was intrigued with exploring what might be called the outer face of experience, that is, the side of experience that becomes apparent—to oneself, and ultimately to others. In this respect, the tradition stretched the conception of what experience is far beyond the inner subjective states that had long been recognized in Buddhist epistemology and meditation theory. As far as I can make out so far, the tradition's principal rationalization for this rather exceptional interest in exteriorized apparition is that it facilitates the compassionate manifestations and magical displays of a buddha, which are for the purposes of teaching others (Thondup: 75, 83).

TRANSMITTING EXPERIENCE

Exteriorized experience is also used as a teaching device in the four initiation rites (abhisekha) system of classical Buddhist tantra, but it is of a different kind and it functions in quite different ways. Here realized experience is produced in a ritual arena as concrete emissions that become the basis of a transaction between people. In this case not only is experience manifested, it also becomes intersubjective.

The rites of the four initiations are described in the “unexcelled” tantras and seem to have developed in late Indian tantric Buddhism (Kvaerne; Snellgrove 1987). Many of these works were translated into Tibetan where they served as the scriptural basis for the elaborate literary, meditational, and institutional systems of Tibetan tantric religion. The four initiations have been widely practiced throughout the history of Tibetan Buddhism, although the more risqué elements of the original Indic forms, like those of many other Indic tantric practices, were often domesticated in Tibet by the substitution of symbolic devices.

In the Tibetan context the tantric initiation has important public, and frequently political, dimensions beyond its overt intent to transmit permission and instruction to practice certain tantric meditations and rituals. The rite is performed by a lama for anywhere from a single student to a crowd of thousands, both clergy and lay, which in recent years has often included western disciples and scholars. The recipients of the initiation
range from virtuoso yogins, who will go into retreat to practice the teachings they received, to lay people and humble monastics merely seeking blessings. Lay rulers and aristocrats seek such blessings from lamas to whom they often offer in return substantial support and offerings, and indeed some substantial offering to the teacher—if not everything one owns, as some of the stories have it—is required before one can receive a tantric initiation at all.

For the serious practitioner, the initiation is universally declared to be the *sine qua non* for cultivating tantric practice and the associated experiences. Without transmission, it is often claimed, if aspirants learn the techniques on their own and do the practices anyway, they can never achieve its experiences and realizations. Such was the obstacle that the famous Tibetan saint Milarepa faced in this youth. And even if the uninitiated does have some experience, “it will have no meaning,” as Namkhai Norbu recently told an audience of western students that I attended. The reason for the stipulation has to do with the widespread assumptions in Buddhism about the importance of lineage and—especially in tantric tradition—the need to have the careful guidance of an experienced practitioner. We might note additionally the social fact that both spiritual and worldly power in Tibet accrue to the one who can claim experience and realization. Such an observation inspires us in turn to wonder about the reasons for the connection of meditative experience with power in Tibetan Buddhism in the first place. It is certainly clear from its role in the initiation rites that there is thought to be something about experience that is intrinsically conducive to communication and that requires interpersonal interaction.

In any event, we can say at least that specially cultivated meditative experiences are fundamental to the operation of this initiation system. On the one hand, the very capability to transmit blessings is said to depend upon the master's own meditation power and experience (V: 18a-25a). And, on the other hand, the very thing that is being transmitted by the master in the rite is itself a matter of experience. Sometimes cast as a realization, a reminder of the disciple's pure nature, or perhaps the ultimate meaning as such, these goods are transmitted through the medium of experience. The Indian commentators, followed closely by Tibetans, connect the four initiations with four pleasures (*ānanda; dga'-ba*), a synonym for the tantric bliss already mentioned. While the division into four is admitted to be rather artificial (one commentator maintains that the actual experiences that dawn will vary according to individual abilities and background [R: 231]), and we can also note considerable slippage in the categorization of the four initiations between commentarial traditions), the ritual clearly traces out a process in which meditative experiences and
their accompanying realizations are to be evoked and intensified (Kvaerne; cf. G: 1.213-229).

For the purposes of the present context, I will skip the first step, the “vase initiation,” which proceeds through a conferring of props and a setting of the stage for visualization meditation. To be sure, however, the costumes and accoutrements that are employed in this initial ritual are meant to help the disciples not only to see themselves as the appropriate buddha or enlightened deity but also to have its experiences and realizations.

The other three initiations engage experience and realization more directly. These rites are connected to the “fulfillment phase” of visualization meditation, which is undertaken after the practitioner has achieved an outer self-image as the buddha or deity. What is cultivated in this practice is the experience of the buddha, through the medium of the realized bliss, or pleasure, produced in sexual yogic exercises. Some of the steps of the practice have been abbreviated and reduced to the display of symbolic cards and other objects in contemporary Tibetan practice (and even in Indic tantra, according to Kvaerne: 103-108). But the dynamics of the rite remain closely analogous to the classical form described in the tantras.

During the second initiation, “the secret initiation,” enlightened experience is transmitted through the medium of a substance. This substance returns us to the expressions of experience. Here it is quite a physical manifestation: the combined fluids of the master and a female consort with whom the master enters into union during the second initiation for the very purpose of producing it.15 (In initiations given by modern Tibetan lamas no such union is in evidence.) In the classic accounts the master gathers a bit of these fluids between his thumb and ring finger, and places them on the tongue of the disciples. The presumption seems to be that the physical manifestation of one (or two) persons’ experience induces a similar experience in other people when they ingest it. The disciples, as if to express the pleasure in what they swallowed, proclaim “O bliss!” (George: 55; Snellgrove 1987: 1.258).

How does this immodest substance operate salvifically? Some sources see its ingestion as a sign: a Tibetan tantra suggests that the temerity involved in swallowing the fluid demonstrates the disciple’s ability to assume the necessary mastery “to take control over all that appears,” that is, to become the kind of person capable of engaging in tantric practice (C: 208.633-634). Another interpretation altogether understands the tasting not in terms of what it signifies but rather as a physical efficacy.

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15 This is clearly an occasion when ejaculation occurs in sexual yoga, although some sources suggest that pre-ejaculation fluids are obtained separately from the master and the consort (Kvaerne: 98). Most other sources indicate otherwise (George: 55; Kvaerne: 108; Snellgrove 1987: 1.259).
One commentator maintains that the combined fluid of the virtuoso master-cum-consort is none other than the refined essence of all enlightened deities; when this sublime material reaches the throat of the disciple, it becomes the receptacle for the emptiness-bliss of the master and disciple to join, thereby enabling the arousal in the disciple of the kind of bliss that will be sealed by the view (Lessing and Wayman:320). To ingest the bliss-produced substance of the master thus effects a physical intermingling of master and disciple, which in turn brings the disciple to have the master’s realized experience.

In the third rite, the “initiation of insight-intelligence,” experience is transmitted through different means. Although here again the rite is reduced to symbols by the use of small paintings rather than real women, the texts have it that the master introduces to the disciple the consort with whom the master had just joined, thereby blessing and authorizing the disciple’s own practice of sexual yoga for the first time. This marks the beginning of the production of bliss in the disciple’s own body, but we can note that this production is still mediated. It is mediated to the extent that it mimics the actions that the lama would have just performed (Kvaerne: 99). And of course, the consort herself is a medium of transmission, passed from master to disciple, thus connecting them.

After the couple joins, the seminal substances produced by their pleasure themselves serve as the medium of yet further experience. The “taste of bliss” increases the lower the substances descend down the central channel of the body. Now it is no longer the teacher’s substances that are transmitting experience, but the disciple’s seminal elements in play are not fully self-produced either, nor is their concomittant experience. There is still, at least for the male, a transmission of experience through someone else’s substances. Here, quite reminiscent of Taoist sexual techniques, the male uses his urethra as a straw to draw in the seminal substances of his partner, which mix with his own substances, greatly enhancing his experience thereby (G: 1.223; van Gulik).

EXPERIENCE AS AN EXAMPLE

We might be reminded at this juncture that practitioners of sexual yoga are not supposed simply to experience bliss hedonistically. Rather, they are instructed throughout these initiations to experience such bliss as empty. Unrealized, conventional experience is being used as a medium to teach something. For Longchenpa, the entire purpose of the third initia-

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16 Wayman and Lessing, not seeing that bla-ma is in apposition to yab-yum, mistakenly suggest that the master tastes his own seminal fluids.
tion is precisely to "show"—that is, to demonstrate that bliss and emptiness are inseparable (K: 74).

This lesson, as in Mahāmudrā, depends on a metaphysical theory that insists that unrealized experience already is intrinsically connected with the realization of emptiness: that unrealized experience already has realized experience latent within it. Thus can the one suggest the other. But this is the ambiguity of experience; for even if it is intrinsically related to realization, it is not realization on its own. A simile offered by Longchenpa is instructive: Sometimes merely to see fuel piled in a hearth allows one to imagine that one is already seeing the fire itself. In the same way, the meditative experiences of bliss, clarity, and no-thought, which are not themselves the actual primordial consciousness, serve to give the practitioner a sense of it (K: 81). Some commentators maintain that even the realized experience attained through the third initiation practices is still but an "exemplary primordial consciousness." According to these commentators, the exalted empty clear light realized in the bliss of fulfillment-phase yoga is but a reflected image of instantaneous primordial consciousness, that is, the "real" primordial consciousness. The distinction demonstrates that some tantric traditions still derogate experience and all efforts to construct it and privilege instead a basic realization that is thoroughly unconstructed. For such traditions, experience once again becomes a matter of mediation—in this case by serving as a device to elicit something else.

Yet the very ambiguity just mentioned—the fact that experience has affinity with and can therefore serve as a reflection of the real thing—means that the status of that something else beyond experience remains in question. And, indeed, in some cases experience is not used to point to something else at all: some practices of the third initiation employ experience, even quite ordinary sensory experience, to show something about itself. One theorist of initiation rites describes a ritual in which simple objects of pleasing, and then unpleasing, qualities are presented to the senses. For example, the master rubs first a soft cloth and then a rough cloth on the skin of the student. The student is supposed to isolate the common thread, or single taste, in these diverse sensations (tshor-ba): the mere presence of sensation as such and the emptiness of judgments about its quality. The lesson is that all sensations are in themselves empty of such imputed qualities like "good" or "bad" (V: 27a-30b). Such procedures, then, make the specially induced sensations of the initiation rite serve as examples to indicate something about their own nature. This implies the

17 R: 233-249 also discusses other Indic sources that refuse this distinction, assigning the realization of spontaneous primordial consciousness (sometimes called the "path of seeing" [darśanamārga]) to the third initiation. See also n. 18.
possibility of a given experience’s self-reflexivity, which, as was shown earlier, is widely held to be an attribute of enlightened realization. But note that even such self-realized experience is not a simple, unmediated matter. It has to double back on itself—which is not quite the same thing as just staying put.

EXPERIENCE, MEDIATION, AND THE BODY

The fourth initiation is supposed really to be the moment when all mediation ends and the pleasure that is experienced is completely instantaneous. Perhaps betraying some remnant loyalties in Buddhist tantra to asceticism, this fourth initiation is reserved for a moment of primordial consciousness in which the techniques of sexual yoga have been set aside. But what is surprising, then, is that this initiation into ineffable instantaneousness is labelled the “word initiation” (tshig dbang), at least by Tibetan authors (cf. Kvaerne:100). Its realization is even said in a number of old Indic tantric sources to be marked by a conceptually reflective thought (ālocana): “I am experiencing bliss” (Snellgrove 1959:1.95; cf. Kvaerne:112-114). The incongruity has been noted and debated, and although it is clear that many commentators believe that the master’s chanting of verses and display of objects during the fourth initiation evoke a direct realization in the students, the association of even this ultimate rite with conceptuality and language serves as a striking emblem of the many ways in which the foregoing study has found meditative experience to be constructed and mediated.

That the practices to attain enlightened realization in tantra and other meditative traditions are pervaded by conceptual categories and mediations, despite a rhetoric of ineffability, will not be surprising. In recent years a similar point has been argued about virtually every religious tradition concerned with meditative or mystical experience (Katz 1978, 1983, 1992). However, while we may note the many instances where the Tibetan commentators themselves grant that meditative experience is framed and interpreted through conceptual categories, we cannot deny that these same commentators will still maintain that the final fruit is, nonetheless, a direct realization of a primordial reality. This was seen in all three of the traditions just considered.

18 There is disagreement as to whether the pleasure of this last initiation is the instantaneous pleasure or the pleasure of cessation (viramānanda). Generally the instantaneous pleasure is considered ineffable and to be experienced self-reflexively (svasamvedya) (Kvaerne:110), while the pleasure of cessation can be associated with reflection. Kvaerne concludes that in the context of initiation the instantaneous pleasure comes first, followed by the reflective pleasure. Cf. Snellgrove 1959:1.35.
What the Tibetan commentators would grant, however, is that the various kinds of immediacy that are projected at the end of these paths represent what we might call a "postconceptual" immediacy rather than a preconceptual one. This is an immediacy or naturalness that is won, like the acquisition of bodily skills, through a process of habituation. It is the fruit of a course of training.

This article has been interested in the ingrediency of experience in such courses of training. The role of experience is most overt in the tantric and Mahāmudrā techniques, both of which begin with worldly, saṃsāric experience—be that the embodied sensations of the libido or the as-yet-unrealized by-products of concentration—and attempt to re-educate it as realized experience. At the early stages in these paths experience is subject to elicitation by special means: images, symbols, exercises, substances, the presence of other bodies. Even the unelicited Direct Vision experiences depend upon prior conditions, namely, a realization of points of philosophical doctrine. Once meditative experience dawns, it tends to unfold into fully crystalized form, but this is both desirable and dangerous, as the Mahāmudrā tradition repeatedly points out, insisting upon a subtle negotiation in which palpability is simultaneously cultivated and yet restrained from solidification. At its best, enlightened experience is shot through with light and self-realization of its own emptiness, as it is portrayed by the Direct Vision authors. Yet despite its transparency it is perduring and salient enough to participate in external domains, and despite its reflexivity it is never simply complacent. It teaches something about itself or serves to signify the virtuosity of the one who has it, or it is displayed as a buddha-emanation to others. Most notably, it is not strictly interior. Its internal boundaries are fractured in the Direct Vision emanations, and in the tantric initiations it is deliberately manifested to induce experiences in others and to facilitate a transgression of social convention, a bridging of physical boundaries between individuals, and even an intermingling of subjectivities.

The multiple borders that experience crosses bear out Sharf's suspicions of accounts of Buddhist experience as an ineffable, monistic ideal divorced from social performance. But the multiply mediate nature of Tibetan Buddhist experience does not thereby disqualify all comparisons with western notions of experience, as if all of those insist that experience is pure or unmediated or mystical or directly intuitive—that is, the sort of conceptions that Sharf shows were appropriated by modern Asian apologists often for nationalistic purposes but which seriously distort the traditions those apologists claim to represent. Rather, we can find western accounts of experience that are quite akin to the Tibetan Buddhist ones in, to take one good example, the American philosopher John Dewey. For
Dewey, experience in fact is most fundamentally “an affair of the inter-course of a living being with its physical and social environment” (Dewey 1960:23). In demonstrating the indivisibility of experience and nature, Dewey saw that experience’s inability to be assigned solely to the subject—a mistake that he, like many other twentieth-century anti-idealistic philosophers, traced to the legacy of Descartes—made it always “a double-barreled word,” in James’ felicitous phrase, offering an integration or consummation of a complex interaction between an organism and its environment (1958: ch.1, 231ff.). It seems that the schools of Tibetan Buddhism we have looked at here capitalized on precisely this multifaceted ambivalence of experience, making it thereby serve long-held goals of Buddhist practice.

Of the many poles that experience mediates, it is its bridging of subject and object which Dewey also noticed that is especially key in serving the Buddhist ambition to collapse these two poles, for experience seems naturally to participate in both sides from the beginning. In these concluding paragraphs I would like to call attention to yet one more set of poles that experience spans for Buddhist purposes, that of mind and body, even if this axis is not thematized in the traditions studied here. Produced by and in the body, experience is cultivated in meditation, I would submit, so as to make the practitioner more aware of the body, to render the body subject, as it were, to the realizations of Buddhist doctrine, indeed to expand the domain of the subject not only to the body as such but to all the activities in which it engages. Simultaneously, and just as pertinent to the Tibetan Buddhist project as such a subjectification of the body (cf. Yuasa; Casey 1987: ch. 8), there would occur its complement, a somatization of realization. Theories of Buddhist realization, which as Robert Gimello suggests are ultimately concepts about concepts, have historically been tied to an ever-proliferating intellectual discourse of Buddhist metaphysics and epistemology, and hence in danger of remaining confined to their theoretical articulation (188, n.35). Perhaps the concern of the Mahāmudrā teachers was not so much to bring realization into the “belly of the mind” as into the belly proper.

It is clear enough that the tantric, Mahāmudrā, and Direct Vision traditions all depend upon manipulations of the body: its positions, movements, impulses, ways of looking, desires. But even the mental side of meditation, its mindful attention to principles like impermanence and emptiness is also, by virtue of its repetitive nature, engaged in a process of sedimentation, whereby theoretical principles are rendered durable, ha-

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19 For Dewey the paradigmatic experience that runs its course to fulfillment is aesthetic experience (1934: ch.3).
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If this is so, then we can further propose that experience—especially the consummate, meditatively cultivated, self-aware kind—is an ideal facilitator for such a sedimentation of the subject and its theories. In the context of focussed concentration the appearance of experience serves as a sign that the incorporation of Buddhist meditative goals is beginning to be successful, and it is also an instrument to carry such incorporation further.

Thus does Tibetan Buddhist experience carry realization into the body, simultaneously making the body self-aware of its ontological emptiness and domesticating realization as something habitual, sensual, and lived. But, equally important, the concrete manifestations of experience also carry realization into the world, rendering them discernible, transmissible, and finally intersubjective. As much a product of the repetitions of ceremony as of private meditation, experience as the currency of public ritual becomes a mediator between master and disciple, between cohorts in the intimate exchanges of tantric yoga, and, especially in the Tibetan context, between the virtuoso and the lay community, who reap the “blessings” of realized experience and who offer in return their patronage on the basis of their faith that the virtuoso is really having those realized experiences.

The variety of facilitations that experience engineers entails that it can never be fully reduced to one pole or the other of the axes along which it is splayed. Even in its most substantial manifestations experience is made to resist full concretization, for it still must have something about it that the knowing subject can reappropriate. In other words, not only does experience bring the subject into the body and then into the world, it also is used to bring the world into the subject. In the case of the second tantric initiation, when indeed experience was transmitted precisely by virtue of something fully bodily, it was finally that substance’s symbolic value—its interpretation—that constituted its efficacy and also, incidentally, served to distinguish this controversial practice from the vilified cravings of conventional sex. Again, Dewey’s characterization of his own work as a “via media between extreme atomistic pluralism and block universe monisms” (Bernstein: 21) signals its suitability to be applied to Tibetan Buddhist notions of experience, and not just because of Dewey’s propitious echo of the central Buddhist metaphor of “the middle path.” More germane to our concerns here is Dewey’s appreciation of the way that experience

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20 The role of repetition in Buddhist meditation deserves further study. On attention, fixing, retention, and non-loss in mindfulness practices, see essays by Collett Cox, Paul Griffiths, and P.S. Jaini in Gyatso 1992.
“stretches,” (1958: 1) both between empirical particularity and underlying truths, and between the subject and the world. This stretching pinpoints the virtue that experience, with its pervasively heterogeneous, dynamic, and all-encompassing nature, would have represented for a contemplative tradition attempting to construct a self-conscious immediacy as the final fruit of a course of training (cf. Bernstein: 15ff.). Dewey himself suggests that qualitative immediacy is a fundamental feature of all experience, yet also—and this is the key point—shows how such immediacy is neither simple, mystical, nor eternal (Bernstein: 96). On the contrary, it only becomes evident as the end-product or consummation of the transaction between organism and environment, and is to be sharply distinguished from the direct enjoyment of first impressions. In light of Dewey’s reflections, we can see more clearly why Tibetan Buddhists, in quest of that old elusive Buddhist goal of self-reflexive consciousness, would have sought to employ the complexly mediate immediacy that fully realized experience offers.

If the rhetoric of spontaneous realization in these Tibetan Buddhist traditions is all about the complete collapse of subject and object, the discourse on the actual practices for achieving this goal reveals the value of the permeability between subject and object, the tending of one towards the other before their full collapse. I would maintain that it is when all three of the interrelated traditions considered in this paper traded on the permeability of what has not yet disappeared into the void that experience really did its work, namely, to bridge self and other, mind and body, and even virtuoso and community. In such contexts mediation does not compromise religious experience but is what makes it viable, saving it from brute, mute physicality and the rarifications of spirit alike.

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21 Echoing basic Buddhist views, Dewey writes, “First and immature experience is content simply to enjoy. But a brief course in experience enforces reflection; it requires but brief time to teach that some things sweet in the having are bitter in after-taste and in what they lead to... Enjoyment ceases to be a datum and becomes a problem” (1958: 398).


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