

The Power of Sound, a Lecture by Fabian Sanders

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The Value of the Word in the Ancient Indo-Tibetan Tradition

Venice on 5 October, 2019



Photo by Giovanna Carraro

We are in Venice, in the beautiful Scoletta dei Calegheri, the room is full. Fabian Sanders has been invited to hold a conference with the explicit and profound title: The Power of Sound, The value of the word in the ancient Indo-Tibetan tradition. The Venetian

Dzogchen Community (Gyamtsholing) in collaboration with the International Atiyoga Foundation has organized this event open to the public on a subject as vast as it is fascinating, full of ideas for both practitioners and newcomers. Anamaria Humeres, blue gakyil member from Gyamtsholing together with Giovanna Carraro and Marco Baseggio, President of the ATIF, present the Dzogchen Community and the Foundation to the public before Fabian begins, as he defines it, his 'chat'.

"Sound is considered a main element of manifestation both in India and in Tibet" Fabian begins to explain. And he goes on to illustrate the 'point of view' from which he will start to explain the essential relevance of sound in the Indian and Tibetan traditions, here closely linked to the Tibetan theme and heritage of some pre-existing aspects in India at the time of the birth of Tibetan Buddhism as it was introduced in Tibet by the great Master Padmasambhava.

"We are in a context in which the universe can be imagined as a pulse, as an immense agglomeration of aspects that expand to an extreme limit (a place, a figure of thought) and once they reach this extreme limit they retract to pass into a dimension, a place of latency, to then reappear", explains Fabian, "A bit like what happens, from a Buddhist point of view, to individual beings; they are conceived, formed, developed, give rise to all their own possibilities, they carry them out and eventually die and, in the perspective in which they find themselves, after an intermediate period, they are reborn and in this way they pulsate, they are like micro pulsations within a macro pulsation."

When the universe retreats into itself and enters a moment of latency, we can say that it becomes a darkness of possibility, but later the universe must manifest all its potential. From the Buddhist point of view these potentialities, or possibilities, are the causes accumulated by living beings in the previous cycle; therefore the modalities and the structure of the new universe will be determined by the actions accumulated by the beings in the world or in the previous worlds.

And here is the crucial point that leads us to the specific theme of the conference: "This first movement towards manifestation is said to be the wind, or prana, or lung (in Sanskrit and Tibetan) which comes out of the non-manifestation in the form of sound". In this very first moment it is a subtle sound, so defined because it is an energetic vibration that expands from this center throughout the universe. And as soon as the sound propagates, light accompanies it, which is another form of energy. "It is interesting to note", underlines Fabian, "how for there to be sound there must be time". Without time the sound cannot manifest itself because only when the instants follow one another, each one different from the other, can there be the sound that remains, otherwise, it would remain within itself. "For the manifestation of light, instead, there must be space, if there is no space, light cannot escape it".

Sound, light and rays: together they symbolize the first potentiality of manifestation, where the rays symbolize "the unbroken unlimited expansion that these two elements, together, produce". We are at the heart of this "chat" that leads the practitioners present along a familiar route.

“Primordial sound is beyond discursive thought, it pervades the totality of the nature of space ... this sound is expressed (and, generally, it is said to be) with the sound A ...”, and Fabian clarifies, “The sound A, which is used in practices as seed mantra, is pronounced by a human being with all his voice organs open, it is the sound that is pronounced with the maximum opening of everything: the throat, the mouth, the tongue is lowered, the lips are spread and so is the jaw. It is considered to be the sum of all other possible sounds, every other sound (vowel or consonant) is a partiality of that sound, just as the colors are partiality of the white light”.

In such a context the vowel A, together with the other vowels, is the life of every sound and in fact in Tibetan no sound can be pronounced without a vowel while the consonants are the death of the sound. The word is alive only with the vowel and if this is missing every syllable is only an occlusion, a negation: this possibility of occlusion is the origin of dualism; this interruption breaks the expansion of the sound in space.



Photo by Annamarie Humeres

“Sound therefore starts as A and then differentiates, undergoes interruptions, changes ... syllables are formed ... which, gradually becoming gross, become phenomena”, continues the explanation.

The time has come for the appearance of living beings who must continue their epic deeds through the garland of the worlds. “Beings have ignorance as the first aspect of their existence, which leads them to conceive a self and others separate from themselves ... they have it by virtue of the

fictitious construction of an ego. Thinking of perceiving objects,” Fabian insists, “the mind gives them a name because otherwise it cannot conceive them”. Thus the mind always deviates more from what Master Patrul Rinpoche calls “the sound of the Buddha’s voice”. The mind lets itself be carried away by a continuous ‘chattering’, passing from one word to another, from one sound to another.

The basis of the practice is to be able to observe one’s mental flow without running after it and, to succeed in this intent, you can resort to mantra, a formula inherited from India, “a string of sounds that should not be taken for its own meaning, the primary aspect it has is the sound”. The practitioner immerses himself and reverberates with that sound by distancing himself from the ordinary mind. One of the etymologies of the word mantra is man= mind (ordinary) and tra= protection: the mantra is therefore the protection of the mind from the mind itself.

We conclude with a quotation by the great Master Shantideva given during the conference, a wish for all of us practitioners: “May all beings that have a body ceaselessly hear the sound of dharma from birds, trees, rays of light and even from heaven.”

Sabina Ragaini