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Abstract

Ultralow-velocity zones (ULVZs) are small structures at the base of the mantle characterized by sound velocities up to 30% lower than those of surrounding mantle. In this thesis, we propose that iron-rich (Mg,Fe)O plays a key role in the observed sound velocities, and argue that chemically distinct, iron-enriched structures are consistent with both the low sound velocities and the measured shapes of ULVZs.

We have determined the room temperature Debye sound velocity ($V_D$) of (Mg$_{0.16}$Fe$_{0.84}$)O up to 121 GPa using nuclear resonant inelastic X-ray scattering. Using an estimate of the equation of state, the seismically relevant compressional ($V_P$) and shear ($V_S$) wave velocities were calculated from the $V_D$s. We have also determined the room temperature $V_D$ at multiple pressure points of (Mg$_{0.06}$Fe$_{0.94}$)O using nuclear resonant inelastic X-ray scattering and in-situ X-ray diffraction up to 80 GPa. The effect of the electronic environment of the iron sites on the velocities of both of these studies were tracked in-situ using synchrotron Mössbauer spectroscopy. We also present the pressure-volume-temperature equation of state of (Mg$_{0.06}$Fe$_{0.94}$)O determined up to pressures of 120 GPa and temperatures of 2000 K. We combine these studies with a simple Voigt-Reuss-Hill mixing model to predict the properties of a solid ULVZ and show that a small amount of iron-rich (Mg,Fe)O can greatly reduce the average sound velocity of an aggregate assemblage. When combined with a geodynamic model of a solid ULVZ (Bower et al., 2011), we can directly correlate inferred sound velocities to mineralogy and predicted ULVZ shapes. Our combined geodynamic and mineral physics model of a solid ULVZ can be used to explore the relationship between the observed sound velocities and mineralogy of ULVZs with added insight into ULVZ morphology.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

Study of the interior of the earth is crucial to understanding both the processes by which a planet was formed and the future impact of deep interior dynamics.

Much has been learned from seismic studies, probing the propagation of sound waves through the earth. Seismic reflectors deep in the earth such as those located at 410, 660 and 2900 km below the earth’s surface have been interpreted as chemical boundaries or phase changes, supported by experimental studies of model compositions of primitive mantle material. The major discontinuities in the mantle are believed to correspond to phase changes, where olivine transforms to the high pressure polymorph wadsleyite at the 410 km discontinuity, then breaks down to form ferropericlase and perovskite at the 660 discontinuity (e.g. Irifune, 1994, Figure 1.1).

The mantle layer between the core-mantle boundary and the D'' discontinuity spans a depth range in Earth’s lower mantle from up to 350 km above the liquid outer core to the outer core itself, corresponding to a proposed temperature range of 3300-4300 K and 115 to 135 GPa. Intermittent detection of this discontinuity suggests that the core-mantle boundary (CMB) layer is compositionally distinct and/or represents a different phase assemblage (e.g. Lay et al., 2008; Sidorin et al., 1999).

1.1 Ultralow-Velocity Zones

At the base of the D'' layer, 5-20 km thick patches have been observed in which the \( V_P \) and \( V_S \) sound velocities are reduced by 5-10% and 10-30% (Thorne and Garnero, 2004). Reduced seismic
velocities in this ultra-low velocity zone, or ULVZ, were first attributed to partial melting due to drastic velocity reductions, sharp upper boundaries, and a strong correlation with hot spots on the surface (e.g. Williams and Garnero, 1996; Williams et al., 1998; Lay et al., 2004). A sound velocity decrement ratio \( \partial V_P/\partial V_S \) of 1:3 has been shown to be consistent with partial melt (Berryman, 2000).

Numerous seismic studies of the core-mantle boundary indicate that ULVZ distribution is patchy and sometimes associated with edges or the interior of large low shear velocity provinces (McNamara et al., 2010). Fine-scale one-dimensional structure of some ULVZs have been probed, finding a steep positive velocity gradient with depth, implying complex interior morphology (Rost et al., 2006). Multiple concave-down ULVZs clustered together have been invoked to explain PKP precursors in
a two-dimensional study, giving the first seismic insight into ULVZ shape (Wen and Helmberger, 1998).

Partial melting of ambient mantle would require the fortuitous intersection of the mantle solidus with the base of the core-mantle boundary. Recent work into the equations of state of fayalite Fe$_2$SiO$_4$ liquid and subsequent analysis shows that partial melting of chondrite or peridotite liquid is unlikely to be gravitationally stable at the base of the mantle (Thomas et al., 2012). It has been proposed that enriched residues of a crystallizing mantle could be depleted in Si and enriched in FeO enough to form ULVZs (Labrosse et al., 2007; Nomura et al., 2011).

Dynamic studies exploring the stability of partially-molten ULVZs show that the amounts of liquid required to reduce the velocities of an assemblage would percolate and pool at the base of the mantle rather than remain suspended in a ULVZ (Hernlund and Tackley, 2007). Partial melt can be maintained km’s above the CMB if the ULVZ is stirred (Hernlund and Jellinek, 2010). Further studies of melt geometry explore mechanisms to retain greater melt fraction (Wimert and Hier-Majumder, 2012; Hier-Majumder and Abbott, 2010, e.g.). In the end, a seemingly simple explanation is complicated by large unknowns in grain boundary properties, melt viscosity, and melt sound velocities.

Solid ULVZs have also been considered in the literature, in the form of FeO/FeSi alloy (Manga and Jeanloz, 1996) or iron-enriched post-perovskite (Mao et al., 2006), but are no longer considered stable in the hot core-mantle boundary regions in which ULVZs are found. In this thesis, we introduce and explore another alternative: iron-rich (Mg,Fe)O.

The partitioning behavior of iron between perovskite(Pv), post-perovskite(PPv), and (Mg,Fe)O varies widely based on experimental conditions. Recently, it has been suggested that iron preferentially partitions in (Mg,Fe)O in the presence of Pv and PPv based on analyses of quenched phase assemblages from pressures and temperatures of 100 GPa and ~1800 K (Auzende et al., 2008; Sinmyo et al., 2008). An enhanced iron content and subsequent uptake by (Mg,Fe)O could result in a composition much more iron-rich than previously considered. Therefore, it is of interest to study the elasticity of iron-rich (Mg,Fe)O at core-mantle boundary conditions, as it may shed light on seismic
1.2 Thesis Overview

This thesis is divided into three studies of iron-rich oxide, the experiments for which are summarized in Table 1.1. All of these studies are united by the use of X-ray scattering techniques using synchrotron radiation to measure the elasticity of iron-rich (Mg,Fe)O. We synthesized our own samples for this study, and describe the samples in Section A.1. Using a diamond anvil cell to create pressures approaching those of the core-mantle boundary and occasionally in-situ laser heating to create temperatures approaching those of the earth’s interior, we measured material properties relevant to the study of the earth’s mantle, namely sound velocities and densities.

Chapter 2 is a study of (Mg\textsubscript{0.16}Fe\textsubscript{0.84})O using nuclear resonant inelastic X-Ray scattering (NRIXS) and synchrotron Mössbauer spectroscopy (SMS). Chapter 3 measured the sound velocities and magnetic state of (Mg\textsubscript{0.06}Fe\textsubscript{0.94})O using the methods described in Chapter 2 with a few key differences, including the use of in-situ X-ray diffraction to measure lattice spacing of the sample and map it directly to a combined XRD/SMS study of the same material. Chapter 4 describes the $P$-$V$-$T$ equation of state of (Mg\textsubscript{0.06}Fe\textsubscript{0.94})O. Finally, we close in Chapter 5 with a mixing model that combines the results of our work with dynamic calculations of a solid ULVZ.

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