LETTER

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Ultralow thermal conductivity and high thermoelectric figure of merit in SnSe crystals

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The thermoelectric effect enables direct and reversible conversion between thermal and electrical energy, and provides a viable route for power generation from waste heat. The efficiency of thermoelectric materials is dictated by the dimensionless figure of merit, *ZT* (where *Z* is the figure of merit and *T* is absolute temperature), which governs the Carnot efficiency for heat conversion. Enhancements above the generally high threshold value of 2.5 have important implications for commercial deployment[1,2], especially for compounds free of Pb and Te. Here we report an unprecedented *ZT* of 2.6 ± 0.3 at 923 K, realized in SnSe single crystals measured along the *b* axis of the room-temperature orthorhombic unit cell. This material also shows a high *ZT* of 2.3 ± 0.3 along the *c* axis but a significantly reduced *ZT* of 0.8 ± 0.2 along the *a* axis. We attribute the remarkably high *ZT* along the *b* axis to the intrinsically ultralow lattice thermal conductivity in SnSe. The layered structure of SnSe derives from a distorted rock-salt structure, and features anomalously high Grüneisen parameters, which reflect the anharmonic and anisotropic bonding. We attribute the exceptionally low lattice thermal conductivity (0.23 ± 0.03 W m^{-1} K^{-1} at 973 K) in SnSe to the anharmonicity. These findings highlight alternative strategies to nanostructuring for achieving high thermoelectric performance.

power factor (along the *b* axis), but, even more surprisingly, we observe that the thermal conductivity of SnSe is intrinsically ultralow (<0.25 W m^{-1} K^{-1} at >800 K), resulting in $ZT = 2.62$ at 923 K along the *b* axis and 2.3 along the *c* axis; these represent the highest *ZT* values reported so far for any thermoelectric system. Along the *a* direction, however, *ZT* is significantly lower, ~0.8. Here, it should be noted that SnSe along the *b* axis shows a room-temperature $ZT = 0.12$, which is comparable to the room-temperature value of 0.15 reported earlier[19]. SnSe, however, reveals high *ZT* values near and above the transition temperature of 750 K at which the structure converts from *Pnma* to *Cmcm*[20–22]. Such ultrahigh *ZT* along two principal directions and the observed crystallographic and *ZT* anisotropy prompted us to investigate the scientific underpinning of these intriguing results.

SnSe adopts a layered orthorhombic crystal structure at room temperature, which can be derived from a three-dimensional distortion of the NaCl structure. The perspective views of the room-temperature SnSe crystal structure along the *a*, *b* and *c* axial directions are shown in Fig. 1a–d. There are two-atom-thick SnSe slabs (along the *b*–*c* plane) with strong Sn–Se bonding within the plane of the slabs, which are then linked with weaker Sn–Se bonding along the *a* direction[20]. The structure contains highly distorted $SnSe_7$ coordination polyhedra, which have