



Buddhism and Music

Buddhism in Every Step

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Buddhism and Music

I. Music and Buddhism

Music gives us the capacity to express deep emotions. Whether through holy hymns or chants of praise, music is capable of uplifting the mind to an almost sublime state. As such, it has a significant role in the promotion of religion. Music has a very important function and a wide range of applications in religions across the world. Music is also mentioned throughout Buddhist writings. The *Amitabha Sutra* says that heavenly singing and chanting can be heard in the Pure Land, as *mandarava* flowers softly rain down from the sky. In the Pure Land, one can always hear birds making beautiful, harmonious music. Animated by a gentle breeze, the movements of jewel trees ring out in melodious chords, as if thousands of gentle tunes are being performed in harmony.

Upon hearing their song, those present naturally recollect the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. Accordingly, all Buddhas and bodhisattvas are very skilled in utilizing music to teach the Dharma and guide sentient beings to enlightenment.

In Buddhism, singing the texts of sutras and praising the virtues of the Buddhas in song have attracted and purified the minds of countless disciples. In one Buddhist text, the *Great Perfection of Wisdom Treatise*, it is said that “For bodhisattvas to purify the Buddha land, they seek out beautiful music, wishing that sentient beings in that land can hear the music and soften their hearts, making them easier to transform. This is why music is given as an offering to the Buddha.” In addition to propagating the Dharma, Buddhist music has long been used in weddings, funerals, and other such ceremonies. In this way, Buddhist music plays an integral role in common cultural practices.

Venerable Master Taixu once said, “Music allows the people of a society to communicate their moods and feelings to each other. If someone plays a tune, it is simple for those listening to understand what mood that person is trying to convey. For society to achieve harmony, it is essential to be able

to understand each other's feelings and establish a sense of unity. This is one of the important functions of music." The capacity of music to capture people's attention, touch them deeply, and tug at their heart-strings makes it one of the most beautiful forms of human expression.

Chinese Buddhist music utilizes a rich variety of musical instruments during their chants and hymns. Since these instruments are used for Buddhist purposes, they are collectively called "Dharma instruments." With the exception of the inverted bell, which originated in India, the instruments used in traditional Chinese Buddhist music are native to China. Instruments such as the gong, large bell (磬, *qing*), large drum (鼓, *gu*), wooden fish, small cymbals, large cymbals, and Chinese tambourine punctuate both Buddhist and Chinese folk music. In modern practice, Chinese Buddhist music is frequently accompanied by a variety of Chinese orchestral instruments, pianos, or traditional European symphony orchestras. From its humble beginnings, Buddhist music has developed to such prominence that it is currently performed in temples and concert halls throughout the world. It now rivals the majesty of western philharmonic orchestras.

II. A History of Buddhist Music

During the Mauryan dynasty (317–180 BCE) in India, the powerful King Asoka spared no effort to preserve Buddhism and spread its teachings. Many developments in the field of Buddhist music, such as the inclusion of copper gongs, drums, flutes, conch horns, and harps arose during this time. As Buddhism spread to Tibet, song and dance also began to be commonly featured in certain ceremonies. There is a section of the sangha that specializes in the performance of music and dance, called the yueshen (樂神), “music spirit,” or *xiangshen* (香神), “fragrance spirit.” The *Mahavairocana Sutra* says, “All acts of singing are mantras; every dance portrays reality.” Inspired by these words, Tibetan Buddhist music has flourished, featuring many distinctive traits and characteristics. In Tibetan Buddhism’s larger ceremonies, lamas can be seen utilizing all kinds of unique and exotic ceremonial instruments, such as specialized drums, windpipes, spiral conchs, and trumpets. The intricate design of these instruments is beautiful to behold.

When Buddhism first came to China from India, translation efforts focused on sutras. Initially,

language barriers prevented the use of Sanskrit Buddhist hymns in China. As Venerable Master Huijiao of the Southern dynasties period (420—589 CE) stated, “Sanskrit melodies are elaborate with many notes. Chinese melodies are more simple, with fewer notes. If you use a Sanskrit-style melody to sing Chinese text, the text will contain too many notes and the pace of the singing will sound rushed. If you use a Chinese-style melody and sing Sanskrit text, then you will have to rush through a long section of text, while only singing a few notes. For this reason, we have translated the sutras into Chinese and do not make use of Sanskrit melodies.” In the absence of traditional hymns, monastics later adapted classical folk songs, along with pieces commonly played for royalty and officials in the Imperial Court. This gave rise to China’s own unique tradition of Buddhist music. The earliest collection of Chinese Buddhist hymns dates back as far as the Wei dynasty (220—265 CE). Cao Zhi, the son of the emperor, was renowned for his singing and composition. According to legend, he was passing through Mount Tu, in Shandong Province, when he heard a Sanskrit song emanating from the sky. Touched by the song’s beauty, he wrote it down and called it the “Yushan

Fanbei,” the first Buddhist hymn composed in the Chinese style. This song became the foundation of Chinese Buddhist music.

In explaining the characteristics of Chinese Buddhist music, the *Record of Great Monastics* says, “Traditional Indian songs which teach the Dharma are called *bei* (唄). Songs which chant the texts of sutras are called *zhuandu* (轉讀), chanting. Collectively, all such songs are called *fanbei* (梵唄).” Its origins can be traced to the time of the Buddha. Another style of ancient Indian hymns popularized in that time period was the *Vedas*. This style of Buddhist chant was adapted from Indian art and mathematics, one of branch of the classical Indian “five sciences.” Buddhist hymns composed in this style are collectively referred to as “noble chanting.”

During China’s Southern and Northern dynasties (420—589 C.E.), the contributions of several emperors deeply influenced the development of Buddhist music. Emperor Wu of the Liang dynasty was a devout Buddhist. His great love for Buddhist music motivated him to write several well-known musical compositions, such as “Great Joy,” “Heavenly Way,” “Cessation of Evil and Wrongdoing,” and “Stopping the Wheel of Suffering.” Though originally composed

for teaching purposes, they were later regarded as quality musical compositions by virtue of their aesthetic value. Emperor Wu also set the precedent of establishing Buddhist children's choirs, with works such as "Children's Joy of the Dharma Song" and "Children's *Fanbei*." In addition, he established the *wuzhe dahui*, the Ullambana Festival, and Emperor Wu's Repentance Service. He also initiated the practice of singing Buddhist hymns during repentance ceremonies. The contributions of Emperor Wu were instrumental in blending Buddhist music with mainstream Chinese traditions.

Some of the greatest works of Buddhist music and oration were composed during the Northern and Southern dynasties period and the beginning of the Tang dynasty. Pure Land School monastics composed several songs of praise for the Buddha that were considered esteemed enough to be compiled in the Buddhist Canon. It was during this period that Venerable Huiyuan of Mount Lu pioneered the use of music to teach the Dharma and promote Buddhism.

Recently, a large volume of Tang dynasty Buddhist compositions was uncovered in the Dunhuang caves of China. These songs are largely interpretations of sutras. They are categorized

literarily as “vernacular texts,” as they were among the first Buddhist songs to adopt the style of Chinese folk songs. Such compositions show an innovation in the style of singing and chanting. Additionally, these Dunhuang texts display a new system of musical notation. Before the end of the Tang dynasty, Buddhist music in China became entirely Chinese and achieved unprecedented popularity.

Later, during the Yuan dynasty, Buddhist musicians adapted melodies from the popular collection *Compositions of the Northern and Southern Dynasties Period*. After, in the Ming dynasty, monastics adapted more than three hundred popular and classical melodies and compiled them into fifty scrolls known as the *Songs Proclaiming the Titles of All the Honorable Buddhas and Bodhisattvas*. Some of the most famous secular music of the time was adapted into Buddhist works. For example, the melody of the Song dynasty piece “A Butterfly Falls in Love with a Flower” was used in the Buddhist song “A Spiritual Song.” Folk melodies were often used for the sake of promoting Buddhism, and Buddhist music became quite popular among the common people. However, Buddhist music still showed a lack of originality and innovation. It remained hampered by elements of conservatism.

After the formation of the Republic of China in 1912, Buddhist music slowly began to lose its popularity among the general public. Fewer monastics wrote new compositions. However, in 1930, at the Minnan Buddhist Seminary, Venerable Masters Taixu and Hongyi composed the renowned piece “Song of the Triple Gem.” They called upon all Buddhist disciples to preserve and continue the legacy of Buddhist music. Venerable Master Taixu felt that Buddhist music was a very effective means to introduce the Dharma. He believed that if music could help spread the Dharma, then it would also bring diversity and richness to religious education. His associate, Venerable Master Hongyi, was an accomplished and esteemed musician before he became a monastic. Ten of his Buddhist and pastoral compositions were eventually compiled into an album entitled the *Qingliang Collection*. However, at the time most people had limited access to Buddhist music, and this stifled the music’s popularity.

In recent years, as use of hymns and *fanbei* became more widespread, there has been an upsurge in the popularity of Buddhist music. When contrasted with the lack of development for several centuries, this is a most welcome sign. During the 1950s,

with the help of musicians such as Yang Yongpu, Li Zhonghe, and Wu Juche, many monastics worked diligently to compose the words for new songs. A collection of their compositions has been released by Fo Guang Shan in an album entitled *Fo Guang Hymn Collection*. Their efforts inspired many who wished to carry on work in this field.

In 1957, the Ilan Buddhist Chanting Association's Youth Choir produced several more Buddhist albums under my supervision. Altogether we produced six albums, a total of over twenty compositions. This was the first time such a project had been undertaken in Buddhist circles. A new epoch in the history of Buddhist music was born. However, many prominent Buddhists did not agree with this undertaking. Despite criticism, I felt that such projects were important for the propagation of Buddhism, and remained undeterred. My persistence was rewarded when, in 1979, 1990, 1992, and 1995, our choir was invited to perform in Taipei's renowned Sun Yat-Sen Memorial Hall and National Concert Hall. These performances, featuring dances coordinated with traditional songs and other Dharma music, marked the first time Buddhist hymns were performed in a public concert facility in Taiwan. In addition, a performance

entitled “Paying Homage to the Buddhas of the Ten Directions: Buddhist Song and Dance” was held as part of a traditional arts festival in Taipei city. This was the first time traditional Buddhist *fanbei* and modern hymns had been performed alongside mainstream Western music, traditional Chinese music, and dance. These efforts served to establish the status of Buddhist music in society, and were rewarded with acknowledgement in all sections of the Buddhist world.

III. The Contributions of Buddhist Music

While some songs express the truths of the sutras, Buddhist *fanbei* also include gentle melodies which praise the various great Buddhas and bodhisattvas. Such praises were originally composed as expressions of faith by Buddhist disciples to leave a legacy of their devotion in the form of an elegant melody. Examples include the “Bhaisajyaguru Gatha,” the “Avalokitesvara Gatha,” declarations of Buddhist vows, and other such praises which have broadened and enriched the tapestry of Chinese literature. Sacred hymns are used in ceremonies to make offerings or invite the presence of Buddhas and bodhisattvas.

Songs such as the solemn “Incense Offering Prayer,” “Incense Prayer for Upholding the Precepts,” and “Prayer for Offerings Made to Heavenly Beings” embody and present the virtues of respect and religious piety.

Buddhist *fanbei* compose a unique genre among world music traditions, characterized by a relaxed and easy pace, soft tones, and a dignified, solemn air. Buddhist *fanbei* themselves also possess the five virtuous qualities of sincerity, elegance, clarity, depth, and equanimity. According to the *Ten Recitations Vinaya*, listening to Buddhist *fanbei* regularly grants five benefits: a reduction in bodily fatigue, less confusion and forgetfulness, a reduction in mental weariness, a more elegant voice, and greater ease in speaking. The *Record of the Buddhist Schools in India and Southern Asia* mentions six kinds of merits that can be obtained through chanting *fanbei*: knowledge of the Buddha’s abundant virtues, an intuitive understanding of the Dharma, a reduction in negative or harmful habits of speech, a clearer and healthier respiratory system, a mind free of fear and anxiety, and improved health.

Buddhist *fanbei* play an important role in daily life, in repentance ceremonies, and in Dharma talks.

Buddhist practitioners regularly chant *fanbei* throughout the day, such as the “Meal Offering Mantra” and “Meal Completion Mantra,” to make offerings and transfer merits to all Buddhas and all sentient beings throughout the six realms of existence. During repentance ceremonies, prayers are sung to guide and teach participants. Before lectures are given on the sutras, prayers are recited to invite all Buddhas and bodhisattvas to attend the service, creating a dignified, reverent, and respectful atmosphere. After the ceremony’s conclusion, the “Dedication of Merit” is chanted to dedicate the merit generated by the service to all sentient beings. Through this, attendees express the wish that all sentient beings be relieved of their suffering and find lasting happiness.

Buddhist *fanbei* do not seek to elevate or excite the emotions of those who hear or sing them. Their goal is the opposite: to conserve emotional energy, calm thoughts, reduce desire, and allow practitioners to illuminate the mind and see their true nature. The *Flower Adornment Sutra* and the *Lotus Sutra* instruct us to “conduct ceremonies and teach the Dharma with music” and “sing the Dharma with a joyful heart.” We can see that *fanbei* play an important role in teaching the Dharma to the people. *Fanbei* music has

influenced and contributed to the cultural legacies of many Chinese empires and dynasties. Before the Tang dynasty, few government artists assumed the work of compiling, editing, and distributing popular musical pieces. However, between the Sui and Tang dynasties, trade between China's western and eastern regions was unimpeded, such that music from the far western and northern regions could reach China's more heavily populated eastern regions. In addition, wars resulted in the loss of many Chinese classics. These factors resulted in a period of renewed creativity and the reinvention of several different musical styles.

By the end of the Northern Song dynasty, local artists were directing the development of popular music. Common people formed their own organizations and even established official performance halls. As a result, during the Tang, Song, and Yuan dynasties (1277–1367 CE), Buddhists were able to gradually develop and popularize a new method of teaching the Dharma, which included public talks expounding the teachings along with the singing of *fanbei*. This popular style of teaching was known as the “singing lecture technique.” These types of public lectures were deeply moving, and attracted the attention of the people. Documents containing historical accounts of this

movement were discovered in the Dunhuang caves. These accounts describe a system of symbols used by monastics centuries ago to teach devotees how to chant. They also contain depictions of solemn ceremonial dances, orchestras, elegant offerings, and the music of heavenly beings. Today, these documents are considered priceless pieces of historical Chinese literature. They are great examples of the contributions of Buddhist music to Chinese culture.

In light of the way traditional Chinese music and Buddhist music have blended together, Buddhist temples could be considered centers for the preservation and development of traditional ballads. During the Song dynasty a famous government official and scholar named Cheng Mingdao attended a ceremony at Guan Yunmen Temple. When he saw the grand formations of classical instruments and heard the crisp sounds of drums and bells, he was so excited that he cried out, “Ah, the music of all three dynasties can be found here!”

In pre-modern China, government officials were required to be accomplished in many fields of study aside from statecraft, one of which was classical Chinese music. Thus, Cheng Mingdao’s words carried significant weight.

The contributions of Buddhist music can be exemplified in a legend of a famous Buddhist musician. During the time of the Buddha, there was a *bhiksu* named Pathaka. His voice was so beautiful that he could calm wild beasts. One day, King Prasenajit was leading an army to invade Anga (a small state in ancient India). As they passed Jetavana Monastery, they overheard Pathaka in the middle of a chanting service. When the horses heard his voice, they became so entranced by his song that they refused to leave. King Prasenajit was so moved by the beauty of the music that he decided to abandon his campaign and return home.

IV. Modernization of Buddhist Music

After I came to Taiwan in 1949, I thought it would be best to modernize the songs used to teach the Dharma. As such, I emphasized the promotion of Buddhist music and advocated simplifying the lyrics to make them more understandable, as well as using more modern and popular musical styles. My hope was that there could be more Buddhist songs which could touch people's hearts, while also being easy to play and sing. As a result, I personally composed

the lyrics to several Buddhist songs and led the Ilan Buddhist Chanting Association Youth Choir in their premiere performance on the Minben radio station in 1954. In addition, I made it a point to institutionalize the singing of modern Dharma songs during Buddhist activities.

At that time, many strongly opposed this idea. Some went so far as to say that such methods could destroy Buddhism. But, in the end, these methods have proven successful. The allure of music brought many into the Buddhist community, spiritually transforming many with constant contact to the teachings. In addition, it has encouraged many talented youths to become active in Buddhism. Many of them, such as Venerables Tzu Hui and Tzu Jung, devoted their lives to Buddhism and made enormous contributions. Even though there have been many setbacks and obstacles, I persisted in the modernization of Buddhist music.

I wanted to modernize Buddhist music to respond to changes in society and provide the best methods to purify the hearts and minds of today's people. Life in modern-day society can be very taxing and quite stressful. Many have a hard time finding spiritual refuge and lose themselves. However,

the pristine sounds of Buddhist music provide a way to convey the higher spiritual states mentioned in the teachings to enrich and reenergize the mind.

Buddhist melodies are characterized as being strong, but not fierce; soft, but not weak; pure, but not dry; still, but not slow, able to help purify the minds of listeners. By using music to teach the Dharma and liberate sentient beings, we can overcome the boundaries of time and distance, as well as transcend the differences between cultures and nations. Music can help promote Buddhism and spread the wisdom and loving-kindness of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas across every corner of the globe.

Modern Buddhist music seeks to bring harmony into our everyday lives, and to purify, educate, and transform the mind to bring our emotions in line with the Dharma. Modern media and communication technology is constantly improving. We need to use it efficiently to bring Buddhist music to as many people as possible. We need to use music to break through the barriers of culture, custom, and language. By using equipment such as folk instruments, video technology, electronic organs, pianos, and other musical instruments, we can create music that suits the tastes and needs of people around the world.

The following are five guiding principles to further modernize and popularize Buddhist music:

- Buddhist music should not be limited to temples and monastics, but it should be played for everyone.
- Buddhist music should be more than just classical verses and prayers. We should continue to create new song after new song.
- Those trying to promote Buddhism should utilize music, for music can bring many sentient beings to Buddhism.
- Buddhists should form bands, choirs, orchestras, classical music troupes, and other such groups to spread and teach the Dharma through music.
- We should wish that, from this point forward in Buddhist history, there are more and more Buddhist musicians as great as Asvaghosa Bodhisattva and Venerable Master Hongyi.

In addition to the defining techniques and styles of ceremonial Buddhist music, we can begin to mix the solemn spirit of Buddhist melodies with some of the qualities of contemporary music, taking the modernization of Buddhist music to a whole new level.

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