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### **Melody and Harmony: The Role of Music in Buddhism**

As a lover of all things musical, I constantly seek information concerning different genres and traditions of music around the world. One type of music that I find interesting is the overtone singing, or “throat-singing,” of Mongolia and the nearby Republic of Tuva. Thanks to the World Wide Web, I have been able to develop a major appreciation for this music, and I now instantly recognize its beauty and the skill required to produce the music whenever I may come across it in a film, documentary, or episode of a television series. A few months ago, whilst attending a theological studies class on Buddhism, I, along with my classmates, watched a television documentary, *Buddha in Suburbia*, which prominently featured Mongolian overtone singing during a segment on Buddhism in Mongolia. This prompted me to wonder about how “throat-singing” factors into Mongolian Buddhism, and I aimed to tackle that topic for my final research paper. However, knowing that I would probably find few sources on the topic, I decided to shift my focus to a more general topic, for which I would most likely find more information. Said topic was (and still is) the role that music plays in Buddhism across various sects. My original thesis was that Buddhism is inseparable from music, and while musical traditions vary from sect to sect, the concept of music itself is prevalent across the whole of Buddhism. After much research, I have found much information that supports my thesis. I can therefore conclude that, both generally speaking and in regards to specific sects, music plays a crucial role in Buddhism.

This research paper contains three key sections. The first section concerns the use for music in the traditions of various Buddhist sects. The second section concerns the adaptability of Buddhism in regards to local music, and the incorporation of various esoteric musical traditions into international Buddhist practices. The third and final section concerns the future of Buddhist music – namely, why music will continue to be an important element of Buddhism in the future. All three of these sections lead to an inescapable conclusion: that Buddhism not only allows music but *depends upon it* in many ways.

Ian W. Mabbett, in an article from Volume XXV of the journal *Asian Music*, details several uses of music in different Buddhist traditions – namely, “As a Form of Notation,” “As an Evangelical Technique,” “As Cosmological Symbolism,” and so on. For the sake of brevity, I will focus on the first three uses, plus an additional topic that Mabbett details at the end of the article – “As a Means of Inducing an Altered State of Consciousness.” Regarding the first aspect, Mabbett singles out Buddhist chants as a means of orally relaying information to those transcribing it. This form of practice, which is prevalent in sects of both Theravāda (“Mainstream”) and Mahāyāna Buddhism as well as Tibetan (or “Esoteric”) Buddhism, may trace its origin to pre-Buddhist traditions, in which Brahman priests discovered that music can be an asset to notation.<sup>1</sup> The second aspect, concerning Evangelism, refers to the use of the music in Buddhist traditions as a means to promote Buddhism to a lay audience. Certain Tibetan Buddhist monasteries often conceived elaborate displays, involving elements of theatre and music, to place outside in courtyards in order to attract laypeople to the monasteries themselves. In a similar vein, the Nichiren sect of Japanese Buddhism has certain traveling priests who will often announce their presence

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<sup>1</sup> Ian W. Mabbett, “Buddhism and Music,” *Asian Music* 25, no. 1/2 (1993), 15-17.

(and intent to sell Buddhist prayer books and other paraphernalia) to members of a town or village through the use of drum music.<sup>2</sup>

Regarding Buddhist use of music as cosmic symbolism, Mabbett, as an example, refers to the *shakuhachi* flute of Japan. The *shakuhachi* is not only a mirror of the structure of the universe due to the peculiarities of its history and its construction, but in addition, the flute's music reflects Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophy by way of being “formless” and “empty”:

Let us remember that a fundamental Buddhist concept [...] is that of the emptiness or voidness of all the contents of our material world; they are like smoke, or a mirage, or a conjuring trick. The void is a very powerful symbol in Buddhism. We should therefore take careful note when the meaning of the *shakuhachi*'s haunting strains are described to us: the sound artfully imitates the sounds of artlessness, of nature, like the gentle sighing of wind in the pines that gently breathes and fades into the encompassing silence from which it came.<sup>3</sup>

In addition, the sounds of monastic musical instruments in Tibetan Buddhist ritual practices are, according to one theory, representations of the powerful “inner” sounds that a monk experiences whilst deep in meditation. This notion is relevant to the idea of Buddhist music as cosmic symbolism because the body is a microcosm, a universe within itself, according to Tibetan Buddhist philosophy, and the body is therefore representative of the larger *macrocosmic* universe.<sup>4</sup>

Finally in this section is the notion of music as a means of achieving an altered state of consciousness. Though in orthodox Buddhism the primary or even sole means of altering consciousness to a higher level is, ostensibly, the practitioner's own mental fortitude – as opposed to artificial or “outside” influence – different “outside” influences such as diet, breathing exercises, posture, and dance, among others, are all means of assisting Buddhist practitioners in achieving

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<sup>2</sup> Mabbett, “Buddhism and Music,” 17-18.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

an altered consciousness. Music – in particular, monotonous chanting – has a strong hypnotic quality that can, in some cases, easily transpose someone, or multiple people as a group, into a different mental state or states.<sup>5</sup>

Buddhism not only has purposes for music of its own, but incorporates music from other traditions into practices for various sects around the world; likewise, secular musical traditions internationally often incorporate Buddhist philosophy and practice into themselves, though mostly in regions where Buddhism is more prominent as a religion. Paul Greene *et al.*, in their extensive annotated discography of recordings of Buddhist music throughout Asia, specifically mention that Buddhist thought and symbolism permeate such genres as Burmese *sauñ gau*’ harp music, Japanese *shakuhachi* flute-playing (as aforementioned), and Sri Lankan pop music.<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, David Harnish, in an article featured in Volume XXV of *Asian Music*, highlights the relationship between Buddhism and musical traditions among the Sasak Bodas in Lombok, Indonesia, and conveys important information about Buddhism and cultural adaptation. The small population of Sasak Bodas, several of whom had previously registered as Buddhists under Indonesian law in 1967 (despite not *entirely* conforming to the tenets of Buddhism), use a traditional local performance, the gamelan *jerujeng*, to convey Buddhist *mantra* (in the Pali language) as well as traditional Sasak *mantra*.<sup>7</sup> While the Sasak Bodas are, traditionally, not the most musical people, their use of the gamelan *jerujeng* is important in studying the strong relationship between international Buddhist practice and local musical cultures.

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 21-22.

<sup>6</sup> Paul D. Greene, Keith Howard, Terry E. Miller, Steven G. Nelson, Phong T. Nguyen, and Hwee-San Tan, “Buddhism and the Musical Cultures of Asia: An Annotated Discography,” *Asian Music* 35, no. 2 (2004), 133.

<sup>7</sup> David Harnish, “The Future Meets the Past in the Present: Music and Buddhism in Lombok,” *Asian Music* 25, no. 1/2 (1993), 29-31.

Another example of how Buddhism adapts local musical tradition into its practices and vice-versa comes from Chinese Buddhism, as described in a Li Wei article from the *Yearbook for Traditional Music*. Though Chinese sects of Buddhism officially place Buddhist music and non-Buddhist (secular or court) music apart, and condemn use of frivolous music *in theory*, the actual attitude towards secular music is far from strictly hostile, as local folk traditions were and still are regularly incorporated into Chinese Buddhist music. Beginning in the Tang Dynasty, under certain circumstances, some secular works of music became the bases for the *sujiang*, or “secular sermons,” which Buddhist monks created in hopes that the teachings of Buddhism would reach a greater lay audience, particularly in royal courts; in turn, laypeople often brought secular musical influence to monasteries when they became monks themselves.<sup>8</sup> Adaptability is an important part of Chinese Buddhist musical tradition, according to Li. Meanwhile, in Japan, during the Nara Period, Buddhism in the region began to initially adopt uniquely Japanese characteristics, and later, at the beginning of the Heian Period, the Tendai and Shingon sects of Buddhism incorporated music adapted from that of various Japanese traditions, and made it an important aspect of their respective practices.<sup>9</sup> Different cultures in different parts of the world adapt Buddhism to fit their cultural norms when necessary (just as Buddhism itself adapts to different situations), and so, if a certain culture has a particular musical background, it will incorporate said musical background into its practices of Buddhism (should the culture be open to practicing Buddhism in the first place). I prefer to use an unscientific term, the “It’s Already There Principle,”<sup>10</sup> as a descrip-

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<sup>8</sup> Li Wei, “The Duality of the Sacred and the Secular in Chinese Buddhist Music: An Introduction,” *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 24 (1992), 81-85.

<sup>9</sup> Jackson Hill, “Ritual Music in Japanese Esoteric Buddhism: Shingon Shōmyō,” *Ethnomusicology* 26, no. 1 (1982), 27.

<sup>10</sup> I literally came up with this term in November 2017 while writing the research proposal for this paper; I hope I did not accidentally steal it from anyone.

tor for this phenomenon. To paraphrase, “if the music’s already there, then it won’t go away if Buddhism shows up in that area.”

Finally is the topic of the future of music in Buddhism. From my research, I can conclude that Buddhist musical traditions are not dying out but actually flourishing, especially due to the existence of modern-day mass media; this leads me to believe that the traditions of different Buddhist cultures will continue for as long as recorded music endures. Greene *et al.* compiled a large annotated discography of Buddhist music from across Asia, and specifically mention that while recordings of traditional Buddhist music (particularly ritual chanting) in Southeast Asia, Mongolia, and Nepal are scarce compared to recordings of Buddhist music from East Asia; however, the existence of recordings of traditional chanting from Cambodia, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Vietnam, as well as Nepal,<sup>11</sup> indicates that at least *some* of the Buddhist musical traditions of Southeast Asia are still very much alive, and thus can be preserved for future generations of monks, Buddhist laypeople, and non-Buddhists alike. East Asian Buddhist music is far more accessible on an international level due to a greater Western research focus on East Asia, particularly in Japan,<sup>12</sup> but the principle behind the recording of the music is the same in this case.

With regards to Chinese Buddhist music, research since the beginning of the twentieth century has supported the notion that Chinese Buddhist musical traditions will continue to survive into the future. In the 1960s through 1970s, the Cultural Revolution in China nearly drove Chinese Buddhist musical traditions to extinction, but after the Revolution had ended, the music made a major comeback.<sup>13</sup> However, in the 1990s, worry about the future of Chinese hymn-

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<sup>11</sup> Greene *et al.*, “Annotated Discography,” 134-137.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 136-147.

<sup>13</sup> Tian Qing and Tan Hwee San, “Recent Trends in Buddhist Music Research in China,” *British Journal of Ethnomusicology* 3 (1994), 64-67.

singing grew upon findings of a decline in the practice. In response, with the assistance of the Buddhist Association of China and the Buddhist Cultural Research Institute, researchers undertook a three-year effort to record hymnal music from various monasteries across China, and to compile said music so that future monks might continue to learn their traditions – and that the music might reach a wider audience.<sup>14</sup> This instance also relates to a point that Li made in her article – the point that Chinese Buddhist music is no longer exclusively found within a religious context. Through mass media, just as dissemination of secular music has flourished, dissemination of Chinese Buddhist music is far more possible in the modern day,<sup>15</sup> and thus the contexts in which it is played vary wildly. Though the use of Chinese Buddhist music outside of a religious context might theoretically be contradictory to the Chinese Buddhist creed, the important detail to take away is that the Chinese Buddhist musical traditions are still present, far from extinct. Research of Chinese Buddhist music is also prevalent in Taiwan, and while the research is very localized and fails to take into account much of Chinese Buddhist musical tradition as a whole,<sup>16</sup> the fact that it is still present within Taiwan is reassuring for the future of the music. Meanwhile, in Lombok, amongst the Sasak Bodas, the gamelan *jerujeng* remains an important cornerstone of Sasak Boda culture, despite growing Indonesian national influence in the region and the *adaptation* (as opposed to the *complete* erosion) of many other Sasak Boda cultural traditions amongst younger people in the region.<sup>17</sup> In any case, the Buddhist musical traditions of the world do not seem to be going away any time soon, and I personally think that that is for the better.

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<sup>14</sup> Paul D. Greene, Keith Howard, Terry E. Miller, Phong T. Nguyen, and Hwee-San Tan, “Buddhism and the Musical Cultures of Asia: A Critical Literature Survey,” *The World of Music* 44, no. 2 (2002), 144.

<sup>15</sup> Li, “The Sacred and the Secular,” 87.

<sup>16</sup> Greene *et al.*, “Musical Cultures,” 146.

<sup>17</sup> Harnish, “Music and Buddhism in Lombok,” 44-45.

In researching the topic of Buddhist music, both past and present, for this paper, I came across information that not only strongly supported my initial argument – namely, that Buddhism and music cannot be separated from one another – but also personally intrigued me and made me wish to delve into further research outside of my Buddhism course. In particular, I took a great deal of interest in the notion that, where Buddhist music is concerned, the line between the sacred and the secular is often a blurry one (though I had thought about this notion for a while, I had not found any evidence to support my ideation prior to my research for this paper); because of Buddhism’s adaptability, with regards to not only its acceptance but also its incorporation of local musical traditions, the Buddhist religion has a long, varied, and intriguing history with musical practices from around the world. As a lover of music of all kinds, I now personally wish to seek out recordings and live performances of Buddhist music from different sects – whether Theravāda, Mahāyāna, or esoteric – so that I may further educate myself and enrich my life as a whole, and contribute to the preservation and public recognition of the music. Finally, I wish to acknowledge my gratitude for the researchers who helped keep the musical traditions alive, whether by writing about them or recording practitioners.

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