

to the flute's tone  
the waves also approach  
Buddhism in music

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*Note on non-standard title:* This is derived from a Suma haiku by Japanese poet Yosa Buson (1716-1784). See Blankestijn (2006, section 7).

## Abstract

Music is an extremely powerful force, a force thought by some to be able to strike a chord with the soul. For centuries, music has been a key part of religious experience the world over and feelings towards music are notably similar to ideas of “the holy”. Gerardus van der Leeuw, wrote in his *Religion in Essence and Manifestation* of 1938, that indeed, “[t]here is hardly any worship without music” (qtd. in Beck, 2006, p. 4). Although some have discussed the relationship of music to Christian religious experience, there is not a great deal of information regarding other religions' use of music. This examination looks at the use of music in Buddhist religious practice, in particular the music of contemporary artists. It highlights prominent artists and their works and discusses challenges facing Buddhist music of today.

## To the Flute's Tone the Waves Also Approach:

### Buddhism in Music

Buddhism, a movement with 376 million followers<sup>1</sup>, has long guided those searching for answers. For 2500 years, individuals have worked towards nirvana, an escape from suffering, through various means. Buddhism is a movement extremely varied in practice and is known for its diversity of style. Sometimes it is found in the form of a monastic institution; at other times it manifests as an independent philosophy. As the world's sixth largest religion, the Buddhist community (known as the *Sangha*) largely consists of practitioners in India and Asia, though it has recently gained followers in Europe and North America. As Western Buddhist practitioners adopt new strains of practice, the two-and-a-half-century long tradition based on the ideas of Siddhartha Gautama expands and changes. As the West turns to the East for new approaches to spirituality, the newcomers have begun to make Buddhism their own, adopting its teachings and wisdom into their culture. Music is often one of the strongest elements of a given culture and, therefore, the extent to which Buddhist themes have been adopted into music is one of potentially large importance in the study of the movement's evolution and expansion. Here, I hope to address both the problems facing the development of Buddhist music, as well as show examples of current successful pop and rock artists and their Buddhist songs.

### Background on the belief system

#### *History*

Before diving into the study of music, it is vitally important that the reader have some understanding of what Buddhism is for context and so I shall attempt to summarize this incredibly complex movement as best as I can.<sup>2</sup> Buddhism began around 563 BC in India. The story goes that a man, Siddhartha Gautama, was born as a prince. He enjoyed an extravagant lifestyle as a child and as a young man lived very lavishly. To create a life of leisure and comfort, his father, the king, sheltered

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1 This figure comes from “*Major Religions of the World...*” by Adherents.com. Other sources differ; the estimated number of Buddhists worldwide varies between 230 and 500 million.

2 Here I am drawing from numerous sources, namely Hanh (1987, pp. 24-29) and Cabezón (2006).

Siddhartha from the harshness of the world. One day, when he was about 29, curiosity struck Siddhartha and he ventured out of the palace, something he had never done before. Outside the protected walls of his home, Siddhartha saw aging, disease, death, and pain and realized that the life he knew was not authentic. Troubled by his new knowledge of the pain in the world, Siddhartha set out in search of answers and meaning. Going from one extreme to another, Siddhartha became an ascetic. He discarded his fancy garments and dressed in a simple cloth before setting off into the wilderness. He joined a band of wandering ascetics and together they attempted to feel as much pain as possible. Fasting and submitting themselves to harsh conditions, they grew weak. After deciding that extremes -both lavish and bare- were the incorrect approach to life and instead favoring a Middle Way, Siddhartha left the others and they ridiculed him for abandoning their lifestyle. Siddhartha met a village girl, Sujata, and received yogurt and rice from her, restoring his health. After regaining his strength, Siddhartha went and sat beneath the Bodhi tree in Bodh Gaya, vowing not to leave until he found an answer. After 49 days of deep concentration and mindfulness, Siddhartha reached a state of enlightenment; he had achieved the highest level of understanding and compassion. He returned to the ascetics who had mocked him and told them of his status and they called him Buddha, meaning “enlightened one”. He taught these first monks many things in an attempt to help all beings become enlightened and these teachings were recorded and shared.

The Buddha first taught what is known as the Four Noble Truths<sup>3</sup>. These teachings say that existence is suffering (first truth), suffering is caused by desire (second truth), desire is caused by wrong view and can therefore be eliminated by finding correct view (third truth), and that there is a method to do so (fourth truth). He continued by explaining the method, the Noble Eightfold Path. The path consists of eight elements in three categories which follow:

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<sup>3</sup> This section is based on the primary source “Setting the Wheel of Dhamma in Motion”, the first dharma talk of the Buddha using the Bhikkhu 1993 translation of the Pali.

## Morals

right speech (do not lie)

right action (do good)

right livelihood (do no harm)

## Mental discipline

right exercise (attempt to improve)

right mindfulness (be alert and aware)

right concentration (be free of distraction)

## Wisdom

right view (understand reality)

right thought (have the proper intention)

Practitioners attempt to follow the Noble Eightfold Path in many ways. With regards to the first category of morals, many Buddhists follow five precepts: to not kill, to not steal, to refrain from sexual misconduct, to not lie, to be free of intoxicants. To follow the second category of mental discipline, Buddhists practice meditation in an effort to calm the mind and to eventually reach nirvana. Regarding the third category of wisdom, Buddhists listen to sermons, study texts, and discuss teachings in an effort to better understand them. Additionally, Buddhists take a vow of trust to the teacher (Buddha), the teachings (*Dharma*), and the community (*sangha*).

Of course there is much more to know about Buddhism. Another key concept is that of reincarnation and rebirth; it is believed all beings are connected and when they die they are reborn on Earth. In a past life one might have been a buffalo. The conditions for rebirth are based on ones *karma* (the sum of one's actions, good and bad). Furthermore, many different lineages and traditions hold different beliefs. The two major schools differ over various interpretations of fundamental tenets. The Theravada school, mostly centered in Sri Lanka and continental Southeast Asia, believe that Siddhartha was simply a man who attained enlightenment through his dedication. They also hold that

enlightenment can be achieved in one lifetime. Others, such as the Mahayana school generally found in East Asia, believe that Buddha was more of a god-like being, eternal and omnipresent. Followers of the Mahayana tradition believe that *bodhisattvas*, enlightened angel-like beings, help show others the way. The bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara and the buddha Amitabha are two important figures in Mahayana belief. In Mahayana Buddhism, enlightenment will take many lifetimes. Finally, it is important to note that most branches of Buddhism are multi-faceted in approach with followers practicing in monastic settings (as monks and nuns) or in household settings (as laity).

### *Buddhism today*

In recent years, Buddhism has been growing in the United States. Between 1990 and 2001, the American adults that identified as Buddhist rose from an estimated 401,000 to an estimated 1,082,000; an increase of 170 percent (Mayer, 2001, part 1). Why has Buddhism increased in popularity? Some of the increase is likely from immigrants arriving from traditionally Buddhist regions. However, the main cause of this increase is the growing number of converts. The increased adoption of Buddhist philosophy and practice can be explained by access to teachings, nature of the approach, benefits of the practice, and appeal of the overall philosophy.

First, the access to materials and teachings have allowed for people curious about Buddhism to learn about its message. In a 1997 article by Daniel Wood that appeared in the Christian Science Monitor, it is noted that in the decade leading up to the article, the number of teaching centers in America increased from 429 to over 1,166. Additionally, with the increased publication of Buddhist interest magazines and books, more resources for learning became available. Furthermore, with the spread of internet access and the emergence of projects such as Access to Insight, a website established in 1993 that provides many Theravadin texts, teachings that before had been hard to find were made widely available.

Second, the fact that Buddhism is very open to interpretation and approach is appealing. The process of Westerners adopting elements of Buddhism is further facilitated by the ability to mix

Buddhism with Abrahamic spiritual disciplines. It is estimated that between 600,000 and 1 million Americans of Jewish and Christian background have adapted elements of Buddhism into their beliefs (Wood, 1997).

Third, many people have found the practice of Buddhism to have benefits such as a sense of calm after a session of meditation. Many are turning to Buddhist practice simply for the meditation and yoga. The draw to solely these aspects is sometimes for health reasons rather than spirituality. However, yoga teachings are also being used, separate from Buddhism, in an effort to calm ones mind and cultivate *Ahimsa*, a philosophy of non-violence (Cushman, 2002).

Fourth, and possibly most important since the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, many Westerners are turning to Buddhism after agreeing with the philosophy of non-violence towards all beings (right action and right livelihood). Activists and patriots<sup>4</sup> who feel that killing is wrong have been drawn to a moral teaching that makes such a declaration very clear. This is similar to the 1960s interest in Buddhism except this time, there is a Buddhist community in place. During the Sixties, many of the notions of Buddhism were incorrect as there were few prevalent sangha centers at the time.

For whatever the reason, the religion that the American public once saw as confined to a few celebrities in Hollywood is now expanding to include people's next-door neighbors.

### Traditional Buddhist music

#### *Ancient chants and devotional songs*

There are a number of things one can be referring to when one discusses Buddhist music: ancient chants, devotional songs, and commercial music with Buddhist themes (performed by Buddhist or non-Buddhist artists).

When Siddhartha died around the age of eighty, his followers held meetings to discuss how to continue his teachings. For hundreds of years, the sutras of the Buddha were passed down orally, largely through chants (Beck, 2006, p. 172). One type of chant is the Theravada chant of the Three

<sup>4</sup> I use “patriot” here in the cosmopolitan rather than nationalistic sense of the word in the hope of contributing to the revival of the proper definition.

Refuges [♫1] (Attached media file information<sup>5</sup>). While Theravada uses chant, Mahayana traditions often expand on the song and include instruments including horns, flutes, and drums.



*Illustration 1: Monks chant a prayer. (di Vico, 2006)*

Of Mahayana chant, Tibetan chant, is most widely recognized in the West. There are three types of Tibetan chant *'don*, *rta*, and *dbyangs*, with *dbyangs* being the most popular. The most used prayer is the chant to Avalokitesvara which attempts to generate compassion (p. 180). Recently, chant received some recognition as the Tibetan lama Ngawang Tashi Bapu was nominated for a Grammy.

In Japan, *shomyo* chant is multi-lingual as Buddhist traditions traveled through India and China before arriving in Japan (p. 182) and is largely associated with Tantric schools. Japanese Zen Buddhism does not have music for art but does utilize music for assisting concentration. [♫2]

#### Buddhist themes in modern music

While traditional Buddhist music is largely performed in Tibet, new Buddhist music is being created primarily in China, Malaysia, and the Western countries of America and Britain.

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<sup>5</sup> The ♫ note symbol indicates that the aforementioned song is playable on the accompanying CD. The number following the note indicates the song's track.

## *China*

In China, many artists use Buddhist ideas and incorporate Buddhist themes in their lyrics. The popular singer and “Diva of Asia” Faye Wong is herself a Buddhist. Many Buddhist pop songs however are manufactured in Taiwan and most commercial Buddhist music is controlled by record companies (Chen, 2005, p. 278). The Chinese music genre is an industry that cranks out pop songs for mass sale and has been around since the 1980s. Chen claims “more and more so-called Buddhist music is produced by people who know very little about the monastic chant tradition of Buddhism, and their musical products are largely marketed by a commercial culture that apparently has little to do with monastic religious and musical practices,” (p. 280). Steen (1998) asserts that the commercial and government control can be avoided through songs released in the rock rather than pop genre. The situation came about after the end of the Chinese Cultural Revolution in 1976. The People's Republic government allowed rock music to be imported from the West. The Communist Party restrictions were relaxed and people were able to listen to and start rock bands of their own. Private production companies are able to get around restrictions applied other genres (p. 153). Cui Jan 1986 song “Yi wu suo you” (Nothing to my name) struck a chord with Chinese youth and began the Chinese rock movement. Wang Yong was one of the first artists to use Buddhism in his songs and through the guise of Buddhism was able to hide pro-democracy messages in some rock songs (p. 157). Hao Han and the band *Zhinanzhen* are additional Buddhist rockers spreading the dharma.

## *Malaysia*

In Malaysia, there are numerous Buddhist choirs and amateur groups. A company, Dharmavillage Production works as a record company for around eight groups, many singing Buddhist hymns in English, a style of music that has been present in Malaysia for around twenty years. One group, I-gemz, released their first album, “Cradled in Buddha's Arms”, in December 2005. The title track [🎵] is a soft ballad dedicated to praising Buddha. The lyrics “Lord Buddha, you're here today to walk with me/ I want to be walking beside you/ You showed me the way to happiness/ I just want to be

with you” are weak and trite. The songwriter, Nee Wern, avoids any possible deep meaning in favor of cliché praise and the result is a piece that ends up sounding extremely similar to a bad Christian worship song. However, another song, “Ever Shifting Universe” [♫4] is actually fairly catchy. This pleasant song does ask a few questions, mainly dealing with impermanence. Lyrics such as “If you knew that happiness won't last, would you shed another tear?” contemplate the nature of a universe in flux. As author Thanissaro Bhikkhu writes:

Change is the focal point for Buddhist insight — a fact so well known that it has spawned a familiar sound bite: "Isn't change what Buddhism is all about?" What's less well known is that this focus has a frame, that change is neither where insight begins nor where it ends. Insight begins with a question that evaluates change in light of the desire for true happiness. It ends with a happiness that lies beyond change. When this frame is forgotten, people create their own contexts for the teaching and often assume that the Buddha was operating within those same contexts.

While I-Gemz may be an amateur endeavor, the motivation and thought behind this song is helpful. Of note, I-Gemz sales benefit the Buddhist Gem Fellowship, a factor that shall be discussed later.

Another Dharmavillage band from Malaysia is Messengers of Dharma. On their 2004 album “Aspiration”, they ask the listener if they have ever felt empty or without a purpose in the song “Temple On Sundays” [♫5]. After establishing that one is confused regarding life's meaning, they cheerfully proclaim “[D]on't waste your Sundays. Let's turn them to 'fun days': go to the temple in the morn”. This song is so upbeat it would be best if targeted towards children, perhaps on a Sunday-school sing-a-long compilation but it is included in all its cheesy glory on the groups one and only album. Finally, the band the Wayfarers sing Buddhist church songs. These songs are similar to those heard in Christian churches of America and are likely used in organized services as the group is composed of members of Buddhist Missionary Society Malaysia. For the most part, Malaysian Buddhist music is composed of church hymns performed by amateur groups recording for the sake of

sharing hymns with their communities.

### *The West*

Increasingly, Buddhist artists and songs are appearing in North America and Europe. Along with the growth of practitioners (discussed earlier under 'Buddhism today'), Buddhist culture and art are becoming far more prevalent.

*Nichiren Buddhism.* One interesting branch of Buddhism that has attracted musicians is Nichiren Buddhism. Nichiren Buddhism started in 1253 when the Japanese monk Nichiren created a *mantra* (a spiritual poem) based on the teachings of the Buddha as given in the Lotus Sutra<sup>6</sup>. His mantra is only four words long: *Nam Myōhō Renge Kyō*, which translates to “devotion to expanding our life to the mystic law of cause and effect through vibration of sound” (del Barco, 2004, min. 1:14). Practitioners believe that this simple phrase is the pulse and rhythm of the universe. It is no surprise then that musicians find this emphasis on the importance of sound compelling. American jazz musicians Wayne Shorter, a saxophonist, and Herbie Hancock, a pianist, are both Nichiren Buddhists and members of the related lay organization Soka Gakkai. Both Shorter and Hancock were key members of the famous Miles Davis Quintet<sup>7</sup>. Now they sometimes jam together at the Santa Monica Soka Gakkai center. While their music does not have lyrics, Hancock penned the introduction to the book *The Buddha in Your Mirror*, an introduction to Nichiren practice.

Interestingly, Nichiren “Buddhism” bears little resemblance to other branches of Buddhism. Nichiren beliefs hold that by chanting “Nam-myoho-renge-kyo”, one's wishes and desires will materialize. Because of this belief, Nichiren traditions are often criticized as “prosperity Buddhism” since followers may focus their spiritual energy on the accumulation of material possessions, a process that most interpretations of the Buddhist “Middle Way” shun. Additionally, Nichiren tradition encourages aggressive evangelizing, known as *shakubuku* while Buddhism generally rejects all

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<sup>6</sup> The Lotus Sutra was compiled 500 years after the death of Siddhartha Gautama. It appears to be based on a discourse he gave towards the end of his life. Mahayana tradition states that it was written down while the Buddha was alive, then was protected by dragons for five-hundred years, and eventually found again.

<sup>7</sup> This group was known as the “second great quintet” (1964 to 1968). The two also worked together in V.S.O.P.

evangelizing. Thirteen million Nichiren followers are members of the lay organization Soka Gakkai, Besides Shorter and Hancock, other notable musicians that claim to be part of the organization are Tina Turner and Courtney Love. The organization started in Japan in 1930 and is controversial\*. However, the British rapper Maxi Jazz is a member of Soka Gakkai and some Buddhist ideas can be found in his songs. He is the vocalist and songwriter for the London group Faithless (with Sister Bliss and Rollo). In his song, “Reverence” [🎵], he discusses his spiritual identity:

Because I'm not a mystic,  
My views are realistic, simplistic,  
One special brew I get through quick,  
And get sick so I don't do it no more,  
I won't find peace of mind,  
Rolling around on the floor.  
The point I want to make is  
You can never escape from your fate,  
The mistake is to take without giving,  
From within,  
  
You wanna know how I'm living,  
I'm cool. I'm looking after myself,  
And I would never put wealth before my spirit,  
I feel it's unhealthy,  
  
The devil creep around you so stealthy, stealthy

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\* Soka Gakkai International (SGI) is widely purported to be a cult or cult-like organization. Concern has been raised regarding the organizations ties to the Japanese New Komeito political party and the motivations of its president, Daisaku Ikeda. Some claims have been made that SGI is not a branch of Buddhism but rather an organization similar to the Church of Scientology. From what I have gathered, I do not approve of Soka Gakkai but have included the artists examined here because they consider themselves to be Buddhists.

Till ya get bold, rush the gold,  
And before ya much older,  
Ya soul is sold. Where's it gettin' ya?

In this song, Maxi Jazz starts by emphasizing simplicity. He mentions his vow to keep the Fifth Precept (be free of intoxicants) and then warns people about the inability to escape karma. He then promises to not put material possessions before spiritual development and warns against neglecting one's spirit in favor of profits. In another song, “Mass Destruction” [♫7], Jazz basically claims that all war is terrorism. His lyrics make his opinion clear saying that “With a long-range weapon or [a] suicide bomber, [a] wicked mind is a weapon of mass destruction”. He goes on to decry disinformation, racism, fear, and greed and the chorus concludes with “We need to find courage, [and] overcome; Inaction is a weapon of mass destruction.” Jazz is sickened by societies inaction to confront these evils and he has vowed to do his part by confronting people with harsh realities.

To do this, Jazz uses more than his lyrics alone. Faithless music videos are powerful accompaniments to Jazz's music. Faithless made headlines after MTV refused to air the video for the song “Bombs”, as its juxtaposition of consumerism with images of imperialistic violence might have made viewers and advertisers uncomfortable with their complicity in war (Shots, 2006). Staying true with the spirit of “Bombs”, the music video for “Mass Destruction” is another powerful call to an end of violence. In the film, Jazz is seen making his testament for peace to a brick wall (see Illustration 2). As he faces the wall, he concludes his argument:

My story stops here. Let's be clear,  
This scenario is happening everywhere.  
And you ain't going to nirvana or “far-vana”,  
You're coming right back here to live out your karma  
With even more drama  
Than previously. Seriously.



*Illustration 2: Jazz confronts the brick wall. (Herzon, 2005)*

Just how many centuries have we been waiting for someone else to make us free?

And we refuse to see,

The people overseas suffer just like we:

Mad leadership, and egos unfettered and free.

They feed on the people they're supposed to lead. I don't need it.

We need to pray away, for the lord to make it all straight.

It's only now we do it right, 'cause I don't want your daddy leaving home tonight.

Jazz is calling on people to pray and meditate to sort things out. This is a call for everyone to be more aware of the suffering in the world (right mindfulness and right view). Jazz, living in London, sees a Christian nation of consumers detached from reality willing to cause harm to others with their long-range warfare. He feels like pointing this out and spreading the message of non-violence is

metaphorically like talking to a brick wall, an un-living, established structure, upon which messages -no matter the importance- fall on deaf ears. However, he is willing to sing all the same, even if his message is ignored.

Another Nichiren artist is Duncan Sheik. Sheik achieved a level of popularity with his 1996 Grammy nominated hit single “Barely Breathing”. This song received the Broadcast Music, Incorporated award for Most Played Song of the Year in 1997. Since then, the New York-based artist has tried to distance himself from the top-40 image with more folksy ballads that are often compared to those of the English musician Nick Drake. Sheik sees Nichiren practice as proactive saying “It is very much not about detachment. It’s about getting out into the world. It is a source of creative energy” (Bellafante, 2006). He was raised Catholic and became a Buddhist at age nineteen. Since then, Buddhism has been a key part of his life and he has said “Buddhism is kind of the underpinning to all I do; it's understanding that you are not your little problems, that everything is flux.” (Finn, 2002). In his song “Foreshadowing” [♫] on his 1998 album *Humming*, Sheik observes the potential of the expanding Buddhist movement:

But the more and more I hear it,  
I feel the spirit rise.  
The people here are talking 'bout  
The oneness of our lives.  
Maybe I will turn away, maybe you will run.  
It just may be a foreshadowing  
Of what's to come.

Sheik is optimistic about the increasing adoption of Buddhist ideas by the West. This song is about the growing awakening that is likely only the beginning of the eventual enlightenment of the World.

*Independent artists.* There have been some efforts by individuals to distribute their own recordings that deal with Buddhism. The group American Zen calls themselves America's first

Buddhist rock band. Many of American Zen's work is critical of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints apparently based on some earlier run-ins with Mormon church leadership. The band is currently working on a new album provocatively titled *Christ Killer*. This attitude might seem questionable (right intention is one of the Noble Truths) but then again, what is rock without controversy? Another artist is Stuart Davis, a follower of the Soto-Zen lineage. He is also a philosopher interested in integral thought and is a member of Ken Wilber's Integral Institute. Davis started his own record company, Dharma Pop Records, and has released four albums of his own music. From their website, Dharma Pop states:

Dharma Pop is an independent media company funded and staffed entirely by volunteers from around the World who offer their energy, skills, and money in support of its mission- Amplifying awareness through art. As the name says, Dharma Pop was inspired by Buddhist teachings and how they may inhabit modern culture without being diluted.

One song, "Swim" [♫9], on his 2001 self titled album discusses death. With a similar theme as Death Cab for Cutie's 2006 single "I Will Follow You into the Dark", "Swim" is a pleasant song dealing with aging and death and tries to comfort one's uncertainties about what lies beyond.

One particularly interesting musical effort is that of Heng Sure, a Buddhist monk from Berkeley, California who records songs to spread the dharma. One song, "Dedication of Merit" [♫10], is a prayer hoping for unity among men. Sure also focuses his teaching at the Berkeley Buddhist Monastery on unity and interfaith dialog.

Another singer is Ravenna Michalsen, a student of the *lama* (guru) Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche and follower of the Tibetan tradition. Known simply as Ravenna, her 2006 album *Bloom* is a collection of Buddhist poems set to music. One poem, "May My Mind Turn to Others" [♫11], is a prayer for personal development:

May my mind turn to others

May I not think just of myself-

But when I do

May I hold my heart in tenderness...

Just like I hope to hold

All sentient beings.

These words reflect on selfless compassion for living beings, which is the key concept of the Bodhisattva vows which promise to help others.

Another talented singer-songwriter is Eve Decker. Decker's ten song album, *Commentaries on Perfections of the Heart*, is the result of a three-month retreat where she practiced the ten perfections of Buddhahood (Greenwald, 2007). Perfections, known as *paramis*, are virtues that are meant to be cultivated to reach Enlightenment. In Theravada Buddhist tradition, there are ten such paramis: Generosity, Virtue, Renunciation, Wisdom, Energy, Patience, Truthfulness, Determination, Lovingkindness, and Equanimity<sup>8</sup>. After the retreat, Decker wrote a song about each of the perfections and the result is outstanding. In "Generosity" [🎵12], she sings about giving a shawl to a cold woman and twenty dollars to a beggar.

What's this secret I've stumble onto

Something we all should have been told

Maybe you always knew

For me, I didn't get it till I got older

But that's better than never. Knowing

The power of generosity

Indeed, the power of generosity is an important idea for Buddhists. It is said that "generosity is the virtue that produces peace". It is believed that the more one gives, the happier one becomes as unattachment provides freedom from suffering. In the Jataka Stories, advice is given to layperson and monk with a metaphor: "Like a jar of water, when overturned, empties all its contents, never to receive

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<sup>8</sup> In Pali, the paramis are: Dāna, Sīla, Nekkhamma, Pañña, Viriya, Khanti, Sacca, Adhitthana, Metta, and Upekkha.

them back, thus should one give away without regard to money, fame, one's progeny, or even our own body to anybody who approaches us with a wish list" (qtd. in Kumar, 2006). Decker's songs have been called dharma folk, perhaps a new genre. However, her style is varied and collectively indescribable. The purpose of transmitting what she realized is clear and the ten songs are wonderful tributes to the parami.

Not all Buddhist music is based on lyrics. The Pasadena-based group Padma Soundsystem creates acoustic sounds which they believe can alleviate stress and contribute to a listener's wellbeing. Their instrumental and vocal ambient music, as heard in their "Bardo Song" [♫13], is very soothing and its rhythm is enchanting. The band claims their efforts at sound healing through sound *mandalas* (meditation patterns) are inspired by the teachings of numerous Tibetan masters including H.E. Garchen Rinpoche among others (Dorje, 2007). Another musical effort is that of Lewis Richmond, a disciple of Buddhist master Shunryu Suzuki Roshi and a leader of a mediation group, the Vimala Sangha. Richmond plays piano pieces that he composes, drawing inspiration from his spiritual beliefs. These songs are purely instrumental; it's just him at one with his piano. On his website, Richmond writes "For most of my life, I have had two clear and abiding loves -- for Buddhism and for music. What these two disciplines share, in my mind, is that both express the deepest realm of the human spirit in a way that is beyond words, that speaks directly to and from the heart... [I hope my compositions may] bring joy and contemplative harmony to all those who listen to them" (Richmond, 2007).

*Major artists.* When it comes to songs that will actually get airtime, one must turn to the mainstream artists that have recording contracts. While admittedly scarce, there are some signed Buddhist artists. Michael Stipe, the songwriter and lead singer of REM is a Buddhist. A number of his songs subtly feature Buddhist ideas and philosophies. Also, Stipe has attended benefit concerts for the Buddhist organizations Jewel Heart and Tibet House, headlining one with fellow Buddhist artist Patti Smith. Other famous Buddhist musicians include the experimental music artist Laurie Anderson and the composer John Cage. Additionally, the singer Jennifer Lopez has recently expressed her interest in

Buddhism after starring in a movie with Richard Gere, a Buddhist.

There are of course a number of artists who are not Buddhist who have written songs that some people have interpreted as containing Buddhist themes (Beliefnet, 2005). A few songs include “Good Riddance” by Green Day, “Your Life Is Now” by John Mellencamp, “The Minstrel in the Gallery” by Jethro Tull, “Do You Realize?” by the Flaming Lips, “Reflection” by Tool, “Aerials” by System of a Down, “Drive” by Incubus, “Bodhisattva” by Steely Dan, “Reincarnation Song” by Toad the Wet Sprocket, and “Enlightenment” by Van Morrison. The Beatles were definitely inspired by Buddhist thought. George Harrison's "Within You Without You" and “All Things Must Pass” draw heavily on Buddhist philosophy. John Lennon's “Tomorrow Never Knows” is based on the Buddhist *Bardo Thodol*, the Tibetan Book of the Dead. Lennon's “Instant Karma” and “Imagine” are others that feature Buddhist themes.

Of note are songs by major Buddhist artists that are explicitly Buddhist. Adam Yauch, a member of the rap group the Beastie Boys where he is known as MCA, is Buddhist and he has worked Buddhist philosophy into some of the band's songs lyrics. Early in their song, “Bodhisattva vow” [♫14], Yauch gives thanks to all sentient beings and then makes a disclaimer about the songs:

There's nothing here that's not been said before  
But I put it down now so I'll be sure  
To solidify my own views and I'll be glad if it helps  
Anyone else out too

With that out of the way, Yauch begins. He makes a promise:

If others disrespect me or give me flack  
I'll stop and think before I react  
Knowing that they're going through insecure stages  
I'll take the opportunity to exercise patience  
I'll see it as a chance to help the other person

Nip it in the bud before it can worsen

This idea that one's enemies are misunderstood, is a key tenet of Buddhist thought. Thich Nyat Hanh writes "When you plant lettuce, if it does not grow well, you don't blame the lettuce. You look for reasons it is not doing well. It may need fertilizer, or more water, or less sun. You never blame the lettuce." When people do harm to one, one should try and understand what circumstances motivated them to act in that way and according to bodhisattva vows, anger should not be harbored. Yauch continues by mentioning the interconnectedness of all beings and makes a vow to live like a bodhisattva:

So I pledge here before everyone who's listening  
To try to make my every action for the good of all beings  
For the rest of my lifetimes and even beyond  
I vow to do my best to do no harm  
And in times of doubt I can think on the dharma  
And the enlightened ones who've graduated samsara

Samsara means rebirth so escaping samsara would be attaining enlightenment. Yauch has taken vows to try and attain enlightenment which publicly shows his devotion to his new spiritual ideas. In an interview, Yauch explains his vow:

To me Buddhism was kind of like an afterthought. I still think it's amazing, but I learned most of what I've been learning, kind of getting me going in a direction, from this friend of mine... So even the bodhisattva vow is something that I had taken to my self, a bunch of years before I had read about it in Buddhism. And then when I started learning about it in Buddhism, I thought, "Yeah...that makes sense. Look, they got that all figured out there. (Green, 1995)

Yauch believes he was following the Buddha before he even knew who the Buddha was.

Another prominent songwriter incorporating Buddhist themes in his work is Rivers Cuomo, the lead singer, guitarist, and songwriter of the band Weezer. Weezer, with their 1994 triple platinum Blue

Album and the recent single “Beverly Hills” being the second most downloaded song from Apple's iTunes Music Store in 2005, is the epitome of pop. Indeed, Cuomo has even compiled “The Encyclopedia of Pop” which he uses to examine successful formulas in pop music of the past; through his own work, he defines the pop music of today. Since 2003, Cuomo has lived as a Buddhist and it has begun to show in his recent work.

Cuomo grew up in New York where as a child he would practice meditation with his mother at a local Zen center. When he was 11, he stopped meditating regularly and only would return to it when under great pressure. Many years later, Cuomo was under such pressure. In 2003, after almost a decade of stardom, he found confused and dejected. Amy Karafin (2006) writes in an article about this period in his life: “Cuomo’s previous songwriting aids had ranged from Tequila and Ritalin to physical pain and induced emotional states, all of which had complicated his life and eventually lost their potency. Now he began thinking about improving his concentration and eliminating ego as a means of making better songs.” To do so, Cuomo studied numerous works of philosophy and poetry. In May of 2003, he attended his first *Vipassanā* course, a retreat he considers to be the turning point in his life. Vipassana is one of two types of meditation taught by the Buddha. The other, *samatha*, tries to generate calmness (right concentration), while Vipassana tries to generate insight. For retreats, Cuomo has spent up twenty days in sequence in isolation and total silence. It is at these retreats he generates ideas for songs. (Other artists who practice Vispassana include both John Frusciante and Michael Balzary, AKA Flea, of the band Red Hot Chili Peppers). (Fricke, 2006). Cuomo studies meditation from S. N. Goenka and does not admit to being a Buddhist. Goenka teaches meditation with a nonsectarian approach. However, Goenka admits he is following the Buddha's teachings and attempting to spread the dharma for the liberation of beings. The nonsectarian forms of Buddhist thought do make sense as Buddhism is usually not a faith or religion anyway. In fact, some thinkers have claimed that Buddhists should dispense with the label. “[T]o turn the Buddha into a religious fetish is to miss the essence of what he taught... [A]s students of the Buddha, we should dispense with Buddhism,” writes Sam Harris in his

essay, “Killing the Buddha” (2006).

Regardless what Cuomo calls himself, it should be noted that he is following dharma. Since beginning the meditation, he took a vow of celibacy (since ceased, as he has married), gave up the drugs and alcohol, sold his car, fasted, and began volunteering at a soup kitchen (Karafin, 2006, p. 2). He always observes the Five Precepts and resembles a devout Buddhist in many ways, save the label. And this transformation has affected his music.

One very important song is Weezer's “We Are All On Drugs” [♫15] on their 2005 album *Make Believe*. Cuomo explains his inspiration for the song on the band's website:

I was living in an apartment above the Sunset Strip, and every Friday and Saturday night I'd hear people cruising and partying, and hooting and hollering. And I went to sleep one night and I heard those sounds all through the night, in my dreams. I had this dream about a kid on the Metro bus, blasting hip hop into his brain through his headphones. And the music sounded so decadent and overstimulating, and I woke up in the midst of that dream, in a haze, and immediately said to myself, “Man, we're all on drugs!” And I instantly knew that would be a cool song.

This is a song about, as Cuomo explains, decadence and overstimulation, party-life styles and loudness, and other distractions and addictions that affect everyone in American society. This metaphor is made clear in the lyrics:

When you're out with your friends

In your new Mercedes-Benz

And you're on drugs...

And you put on your headphones

And you step into the zone

When you're on drugs

The first stanza lines talk about attachment to material possessions. Mercedes-Benz is a brand that is associated with decadence and luxury – the extreme of material goods. Later, the song mentions the power of distraction. One of the Noble Truths is right concentration and obnoxious noise pollution can destroy potential.

And the best of your days  
Will vanish into haze  
When you're on drugs  
And you wish you can quit  
'Cause you're really sick of it  
But you're on drugs

This stanza emphasizes the powerful addiction that desires can cause. Desire diminishes mindfulness and right view. Desire can be extremely powerful and addictive and can ruin ones life.

The most important statement in the song is Cuomo's goal of escaping attachment and attaining enlightenment.

I want to reach a higher plane,  
Where things will never be the same.

This goal is similar to Adam Yauch's vow to work towards enlightenment. Rivers Cuomo has successfully escaped some addictions and distractions but he admits he has not yet reached the higher plane of nirvana.

Since this song was released, many have been confused over the lyrics thinking that the song was about narcotics and substance abuse. While some band members have stated this is a possible interpretation, Cuomo is the one who wrote the song and he claims that the song's lyrics should not be taken literally, but as a metaphor for addiction.

Cuomo is a dedicated Buddhist who intends to practice meditation for the rest of his life. Importantly, Cuomo shuns attention to his meditation that might inflate his ego. He does not mind

being an ambassador for the lifestyle but he does not want to develop a boastful self-image.

### *Challenges facing Buddhist music*

One problem is that the Theravada tradition shuns music as a luxury and only allow it to be performed under certain conditions (Beck, 2006, p. 173). Spoken works such as poetry are not under this scrutiny. It is generally held that music is only suitable if it is tied to a message (p. 175). Music simply as art or entertainment would not be acceptable. Literature such as the *Sarvastivada-vinaya*, a set of guidelines and rules to discipline the monastic community, forbids monks from listening or performing music (Chen, 2005, p. 268).



*Illustration 3: A monk listens to an mp3 player. (Adivarekar, 2007)*

Another problem is Buddhism's anti-capitalist attitude. As the stories advise to be generous like a tipped-out jar of water, it is difficult to set out to work in a highly competitive industry based on sales. However, as we have seen, many artists have remained independent or have started their own labels. In addition, groups have donated profits to their sangha. The Beastie Boys royalties on the song "Bodhisattva vow" go to a Tibet advocacy group. Right livelihood is one of the noble truths so economics must definitely be considered in the expansion of Buddhist music. Provided the goal of an artist is to help spread the dharma and not to get rich, Buddhist projects can remain authentic.

It should be pointed out that Buddhism generally avoids outreach and evangelizing. Interestingly, a number of artists are of the Nichiren school, one of the only ones that allows evangelizing. Perhaps this attitude helps these artists use Buddhism in their songs where others might withhold preaching. Regardless, the problem of spreading the music remains. In America, there are over 500 Christian music stations (Greenwald, 2006). These radio stations receive support from those who believe that "the Good News" must be spread far and wide. This airplay helps promote Christian

music and is depended on by bands. It is highly doubtful that Buddhism will shift its attitude dramatically enough to even consider some sort of endeavor like that, let alone have the resources to pull it off. Spiritual music is usually not given time on mainstream Clear Channel/Cumulus stations so dharma folk and other Buddhist music will need to depend on the internet for distribution.

Finally, the overall world market may have, up until now, not been attractive enough for record companies to bother with Buddhist music. As the movement grows, however, the acceptance and prevalence of Buddhist music is sure to grow as well.

### Conclusion

Despite the challenges facing Buddhist music expansion, in the last few years, dharma song has increased dramatically and this is a trend that is not going to stop anytime soon. It makes sense for music to be a strong part of Buddhism since music is changing and flowing. Music can help teach: “Part of human suffering is that people desire to hold on to something permanent when, in fact, all of reality is transient in nature... Because [listeners] cannot possess something so transient, listening to music serves to assist them in letting go of both desire and the individual sense of self” (Beck, 2006, p. 185). The Buddha himself supported the use of music. In his *Treatise on the Perfection of Great Wisdom*, he tells his followers “In order to build a Pureland, the Bodhisattvas make use of beautiful music to soften people’s hearts. With their hearts softened, people’s minds are more receptive, and thus easier to educate and transform through the teachings,” (qtd. in Yun, 2005). So, provided artists have right intention, they should record Buddhist music inspired by the dharma. The Venerable Master Hsing Yun (2005) has outlined five guidelines that may be useful:

1. Buddhist Music should not be something unique to temples and monastic life, but should move towards spreading out to the general public.
2. In addition to Buddhist verses and chanted prayers, we need to continue creating more and more new musical pieces.
3. Those propagating Buddhism should from now on do more to advocate the use of music, and

should use music to attract the public to study Buddhism.

4. Buddhists can start to form bands, choirs, orchestras, classical music troupes, etc. to use music to spread and teach the Dharma.

5. I hope that from this day on, we can see new musical talent make a mark in Buddhist history in the same mold of the likes of Asvaghosa Bodhisattva and Venerable Master Hongyi.

I set out to find out if there was such a thing as Buddhist music and it turns out there is. From churches in Malaysia, to manufactured pop in China, to Soka Gakkai singers in London, to independent artists across America, to some of the biggest names in the record industry, Buddhist music is expanding and catching on. Sure, there are a few future issues that may affect the growth of this genre but for the most part, from what we have seen so far, there's not much holding Buddhist thought back. The future of Buddhist music looks promising!

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## Discography

<u>Song</u>	<u>Length</u>	<u>Artist</u>	<u>Album</u>
1 - The Three Refuges - Tibet	2:01	Unkown	Sacred Sound
2 - Great Wisdom sutra - shomyo	1:57	Unknown	Sacred Sound
3 - Cradled in Buddha's Arms - i.gems	1:15	i.gems	Cradled in Buddha's Arms
4 - Ever Shifting Universe - i.gems	1:14	i.gems	Cradled in Buddha's Arms
5 - Temple on Sunday - M.O.D.	1:19	Messengers of Dharma	Aspiration
6 - Reverence - Faithless	3:45	Faithless	Forever Faithless: The Greatest Hits
7 - Mass Destruction - Faithless	3:32	Faithless	Forever Faithless
8 - Foreshadowing - Sheik	8:10	Duncan Sheik	Humming
9 - Swim - Davis	4:25	Stuart Davis	Stuart Davis
10 - Dedication of Merit - Sure	2:11	Rev. Heng Sure	Guitar Music
11 - May My Mind Turn to Others - Ravenna	3:20	Ravenna	Bloom
12 - Generosity - Decker	2:00	Eve Decker	Commentary on Perfections of the Heart
13 - Bardo Song (Chanda Mix) - Padma	11:11	Padma Soundsystem	Sound Healing
14 - Bodhisattva Vow - Yauch	3:08	Beastie Boys	Ill Communication
15 - We Are All on Drugs - Cuomo	3:35	Weezer	Make Believe

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