

## **Toward a “Buddhist Music”: Precursors East and West**

**Robert Morris**

**Eastman School of Music, University of Rochester**

Tonight I’m going to talk about how certain values and ideas that derive from Buddhist thought and practice might have some connection—even relevance—for the composition, interpretation and appreciation of Western music. While this might seem a straightforward task, it is not. In fact, it is fraught with all kinds of complications and problems that threaten to undermine the whole project. So I’m going to begin by offering you a series of caveats to contextualize this topic and make it more manageable. Then I’ll introduce a network of basic Buddhist concepts and ideas followed by a discussion of how strands of Buddhism and its philosophy have influenced or resonate with particular aspects of Western art and letters. Finally I will focus on how our ideas about and experience of music might be reconfigured by considering them from Buddhist points of view. All of this will have to be somewhat sketchy, but the books and articles listed in the bibliography will help fill in some details.

To begin, let us examine my talk’s title to get at some of the problematics involved. The first word, “toward” has been taken up already, so we move on to the next two words, “a Buddhist.” The definite article would not do. Like Christianity, Buddhism is a complex of overlapping religious traditions and practices, each sharing some points and interpretations, but having no complete unity. To the typical Westerner, Buddhism is probably recognized in only a few of its guises—Tibetan Buddhism and Zen—the forms

that are most generally practiced in the West by people who are not of Asian descent. And even these forms are highly misunderstood and mischaracterized certainly in even very recent journalism, not to mention the mass media.

“Music” is the fourth word in the title. Here we have similar problems to “Buddhist.” My word processor notifies me that the word musics is not in its dictionary, so although I may wish to identify Rock from Classical as two different musics, it would rather have me write that Rock and Classical are two forms of music. Certainly these musics are not just different forms, but have different principles of organization, aesthetic function and cultural meaning; and from the point of view of each, one is hierarchized over the other. Knowing one hardly helps you know the other. The field of ethnomusicology was stimulated by an anthropological desire to get beyond ethnocentric structural description and value ascription, so one could understand each music as in and of itself, and especially from the point of view of the practitioners of each. Of course, there’s still the problem of who is writing the description, but I’ll leave that alone for now.

I put the words “Buddhist Music” in scare quotes because from some points of view a Buddhist music makes no sense. First of all, popular and art music in the West have been almost completely secularized since the beginning of the 19th-century, and, especially in the United States, religious musics, or music expressing religious value, tends to be segregated from secular music, as if the connection were to breach the Constitutionally guaranteed separation of church and state.

But the relation of religion to music is more complex than this. In some cases, the religious component may be only matter of words. For instance, the phenomenon of Christian Rock differs only from Rock, per se, in the text sung and the performance setting in church meetings. In contrast, the Passions or the B-minor mass of Bach are based in music that had been traditionally Lutheran—hymns, chorales, and the settings of the mass. And many aspects of the fabric of Bach’s music—for instance, the tonality, syntax and polyphony—are deployed to project the values of penitence, redemption, and glory inherent in the Lutheran Protestant faith. And yet one does not have to be a Lutheran to be deeply moved by it.

Buddhist music is also problematic from many Buddhist points of view. In the Pali suttas of Early Buddhism, monks are enjoined to avoid music and dancing, as they are distractions if not snares to following the Buddhist path to Nirvana. Yet even in the Theravada tradition of Southeast Asia—what remains today of one of the eighteen Early Buddhist denominations—there is something performed in ritual that sounds like music. Here’s an example from Sri Lanka.

#### Example 1

A Buddhist would not call this chanting music, any more than a Muslim would call the recitation of the Koran intoned for prayer five times a day music. In later forms of Buddhism, chanting is aligned with tantric practice, in which sound itself is not only considered a path to enlightenment, but spiritual in and of itself. When a fledgling Zen

monk asked how to enter the path, his preceptor said, “Do you hear the mountain stream? Enter there.” But in most cultures, music is socially constructed, rather than considered “natural” or found in nature. It is interesting that recent definitions of progressive 20th-century Western composers have redefined music as “organized sound” and that one of them, John Cage, actually embraced Zen Buddhist ideas as a foundation for his own compositions and their social and artistic function. I will discuss some of Cage’s ideas later in this talk.

However, there are distinct musical repertoires that are designated Buddhist in East Asia and Japan. First, let us hear an excerpt from a suite of music originating in the Ming dynasty. It is performed at the Zhihuasi temple in Beijing at daytime Buddhist services and during firework displays at night. The performers are Buddhist monks, who rigorously learn this music over the course of seven years. The repertoire is fixed and admits of no additions or changes.<sup>1</sup> Like other forms of traditional Chinese music, the music is heterophonic, with each musician playing variations on the same melody simultaneously.

Example 2.

The next example of Buddhist music comes from Japan and is played on the Shakuhachi, an end blown flute. The instrument is presently played in many forms of music including jazz and rock, but some of the traditional pieces in its repertoire date back to the early

---

<sup>1</sup> Buddhist music of this type is also preserved and performed in Tai-wan

Edo period (1603-1868) and are specifically designated as Buddhist. The shakuhachi was introduced to Japan from China around 1000 CE. Japanese Zen Buddhist monks of the Fuke sect, called the Komoso, supposedly used the flute for religious purposes. With rattan baskets over their heads as so to hide their identities, they wandered through the Japanese countryside playing the shakuhachi at temples for spiritual enlightenment—but also as spies! Buddhist values are expressed in the way the music asserts impermanence in its loosely connected, rambling phrases, by the emphasis on sound itself consisting of a great variety of tone colors, and the way the act of meditation is enabled and invoked by breath control.<sup>2</sup>

### Example 3

Finally, let me play a contemporary Buddhist piece from Japan. The album notes implore the listener to “[l]et the gentle serenity of ancient Buddhist chants show you the way to deeper relaxation, more reflective meditation, and profound self-examination.”

### Example 4

---

<sup>2</sup> "There is no secret to excel in playing the shakuhachi.  
Blow not intensely, but from your heart.  
Although technique is secondary, it helps to express your true self.  
If we are natural, we make fine sound.  
If we have an open mind, our sound will be mellow.  
If we have right attitudes toward life,  
Our music will be acceptable to everyone.  
Take care of your sound as you would care for yourself." -- Koga

- Denise Raven

As you have just heard, this CD presents Japanese Buddhist chant alternating and overlapped with electronic sounds resembling generic “New Age” music. The liner notes state that this music is meant to be “healing,” based on the philosophy of “‘okyou,’ the tradition of chanting of Buddhist sutras.”

The words after the colon in my title: “Precursors East and West,” have already begun to be addressed as I cite musical examples exemplifying different forms of Buddhist practice, but the dualism East versus West is no longer useful in either religion, philosophy or music. Historical scholarship has revealed many intricate links between the cultures of Europe and Asia and for many centuries now there has been cross-cultural affiliation and influence between these societies, accelerating greatly since the Second World War. Indeed, Buddhism itself started out in North India, spread south to Southeast Asia, west as far as Persia, and northeast to China and later to Korea and Japan. Most Westerners associate Buddhism with China or Japan, which is certainly correct, for it is no longer practiced in India. But it is important to know that Buddhism and religions, such as Taoism and Confucianism in China and Shinto in Japan, mutually transformed each other. Even in India, Buddhism did not remain insular. Up to about 1000 CE there was continuous dialogue and debate between what we now call Hinduism and Buddhism in universities and monasteries throughout the Indian subcontinent. After all, Buddhism emerged in the third century BCE along with and in response to the Indian Upanishads and other philosophies such as materialism, and what would become Hindu philosophic disciplines such as Yoga and Samkhya.

I've alluded to Buddhist values several times now; so I want to give a capsule summary of some core Buddhist concepts and ideas before I go on to discuss some Western connections with Buddhist thought. Like other religions, Buddhism is soteriological, concerned with salvation, however, unlike many other faiths, it operates not by changing the world or praying to God, but by understanding the mind. In this way, it entails a theory of psychology, among the earliest to arise in recorded history. First, it notes that normally people rarely pay much attention to what is happening within and without them. The mind is constantly wandering from one thought to the next. One is either attracted to, repelled by, or fantasizing about something.

Second, Buddhism asserts that if one begins to observe the world disinterestedly, three facts of life come into view: these are neither beliefs nor doctrines, just observations that can be confirmed simply by paying attention. In this way Buddhism is pragmatic not dogmatic. It asks you to see for yourself; "be a lamp unto yourself."

The three facts are: a) Nothing is permanent—things are always changing; nothing stays the same; things that seem permanent are just changing at a slower rate than other things that we notice are changing. b) There is no self. Nothing is really more than its parts; we can name the collection, but it is just that, a name for the set. There is no core or hierarchy. Identity is just being like something else; therefore having identity has no selfhood. If we have to identify an aspect of the personality that we call the self, it is just a collection of features (that change). c) Everyone is suffering to some degree. Four major forms of suffering we all endure are birth, old age, disease, and death.

At this stage Buddhism can seem very pessimistic—and very idealistic, even radical, as it asks one to give up the idea of monumentality and self. I should mention that the concept of self in later Buddhism becomes quite complex positing a formless or true self as opposed to the illusory individual self.<sup>3</sup>

Each fact has a positive side. With regard to fact a), no suffering is forever; bad times will change for the better. As for b), if there is no self, who is suffering? And c), sentient beings are united in their suffering, precisely because there is no self that separates them. This leads to compassion for all living things.<sup>4</sup>

On the basis of the three facts, Buddhism offers an analysis of suffering that paves the way toward release, which is called *Nirvana*, a term borrowed from Hinduism. Suffering is built on: (1) clinging (desire for permanence and preservation of self)—when things are good we don't want change; (2) desire for changes from the self's suffering to satisfaction or pleasure; and desire for stability to get what we want and preserve self. Even to “try” to help others is a form of desire. Our sense of alienation is produced by segregating ourselves from knowledge of impermanence and no-self and from other people and things that remind us of this knowledge. As we react by clinging and desiring we are not free and only perpetrate more clinging and desiring in others and ourselves.

---

<sup>3</sup> This distinction may remind one of the differences between the individual atman (soul) in Hinduism versus Brahman, the underlying essence of everything, except that Buddhism asserts the atman is nonexistent.

<sup>4</sup> But most forms of Buddhism start by stimulating compassion and lead to the three facts as a consequence of attending to the suffering in the world.

The syndrome is that of addiction—one needs larger and larger hits to get the same high, until there is violence and destruction to oneself and others. Thus, desiring and clinging must be put to rest.

While Buddhism asserts that changes in thinking can start a process of salvation, desiring and clinging are not only concepts but also ingrained habits of thought and feeling; therefore, the process is not easy. The main discipline to remove habits of clinging and desire is meditation. After a while, meditation, supplemented by Buddhist ethics, brings calm, focus, and insight.

Some forms of Buddhism, such as the Madhyamika, go further. After one has practiced meditation and ethics for a while, the distinction between impermanence and permanence, self and no-self, and suffering and non-suffering dissolve and we have peace and joy. It becomes clear that the “facts of life” way of looking at the world, which helped one initially to escape from suffering and bad-thinking, was actually a side effect of one’s suffering and bad thinking. So the three facts of life idea is thrown away once it has done its job.

The idea here is called the *madhyamika*, or middle way; that is, not going to extremes. For instance, when one understood permanence was impossible, one thought to embrace the opposite, impermanence; but the “answer” is to let the distinction be, not desire or cling to either. Thus, salvation in much of Buddhism does not follow dialectic like thesis, antithesis, and transcendence, but it suggests dissolution of the conflict between

oppositions, because the whole issue is ultimately a matter of conceptual thinking. In other words, the middle way says: do not embrace extreme opposites, for this reifies the concepts; rather, stay in the middle so you don't become attached; you notice the opposites, but they don't affect you.<sup>5</sup>

Early Buddhism doesn't speculate on metaphysics or ontology. It is simply pragmatic in its methods of healing (salvation).<sup>6</sup> Later Buddhism invests in various ontologies and metaphysics, especially in its tantric forms such as Tibetan Buddhism. For instance, Yogachara is Buddhist idealism, while other forms emphasize meditation (Zen), worship (Pure Land), or what in the West we might call deconstruction (Madhyamika and Hua-Yen).

Western scholars knew Buddhism as early as the 16th century via Christian missionaries, who traveled from Europe to the East and sent back reports that understandably were biased and misleading. A more serious interest in Indian thought, especially Hinduism, was initiated by Sir William Jones, an English scholar who served as a judge in India. He established the "Asiatic Society" in 1784 to study Indian Sanskrit texts. But it was only in the early 19th-century that French Orientalist Eugene Burnouf and Christian Lassen published the first Western study of the Pali language in 1826. Since Early Buddhist texts

---

<sup>5</sup> In this way, the middle way should not be confused with Aristotle's conception of virtue, which is only articulated by actions intermediate between excess and deficiency.

<sup>6</sup> In some ways, Hinduism is Buddhism but with much more emphasis on wisdom and speculations about whether there is actually a true self (atman) and how that relates to "being" (Brahman). But Hinduism tends to hierarchize society, while Buddhism is more equalitarian, at least in the community of monks..

are written in Pali, major works on Buddhism by Burnouf, Max Muller and others followed.

I mention this history of Buddhist scholarship since the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer felt Buddhism had great affinity with his own philosophy. Schopenhauer became first acquainted with Hindu thought circa 1813, but did not acquire much knowledge of Buddhism until about 1818, after he had finished his major work, *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*. In subsequent editions of this book, Schopenhauer connected his ideas with various Buddhist schools. Whether or not he got Buddhism right, or even touched its essentials, is a sticking point that has been debated ever since.

I am going to spend a little time on Schopenhauer since he gave pride of place to music of all the arts, by virtue of its having a special role within his epistemology. Taking his cue from Emanuel Kant, Schopenhauer introduced his famous distinction between representation and the will; that is, the world can only be represented as phenomena by functions of the mind, whereas the world in itself is not observable directly, if at all. In Schopenhauer, things-in-themselves are felt subjectively as the will to live, a grasping for completion, satisfaction, and closure. Thus the will is continually in a state of suffering, while it also objectifies itself as phenomena so as to reach its own ends. Aesthetics is central in Schopenhauer's metaphysics. "The pleasure of everything beautiful, the consolation afforded by the art...is due to...the will, existence itself is a constant suffering. The same thing, on the other hand...repeated throughout art, free from pain, presents us with a considerable spectacle. Meanwhile, [the artist] bears the cost of

producing that play; in other words, he himself is the will objectifying itself and remaining in constant suffering.[I, 267].” A few sentences later Schopenhauer contrasts the artist with the “saint who has attained resignation” by quieting the will. Music, unlike the other arts, does not work with copies or repetitions of ideas about the inner nature of the world, but is “a copy of the will itself, the objectivity of which are the Ideas.[I, 257]” The other arts “only speak of the Shadow,” alluding to Plato’s image of the cave in which we can only know of things indirectly as shadows projected on the wall, while “music is of the essence.” Thus the struggles of the will are written into the nature of music itself, and projected subjectively. Schopenhauer tries to show that the structure of music also objectifies the will, but his arguments are unconvincing, based on theories of music that represent the normative aspects of music of his time, and without generality or rigor. In any case, because music is a copy of the will, we receive an understanding of world as will, in-itself, but without pain or trouble. In this way, the will is aestheticized and we get a respite from its endless suffering.

To be clear about what music Schopenhauer is thinking of, here is a portion of Richard Wagner’s Prelude to *Tristan und Isolde*, the *locus classicus* of the expression of yearning. You can’t but help hear sighs of unrequited need in every phrase.

#### Example 5

The connection of will and its invocation in music to Buddhism should be obvious. The elements of clinging and desire, the heart of suffering, are the attributes of the will. Of

course, in Buddhism, the will would be a matter of bad habits of thought and feeling, not things in themselves. Nonetheless, while music has the power to reveal the dynamics of suffering, it does nothing to save one from it. It ultimately functions as momentary relief from suffering, which can become an addiction, like the substance abuse of an analgesic. For Schopenhauer, asceticism is the only way out.<sup>7</sup>

It's interesting to contrast Kant's earlier ideas on aesthetic judgment with Schopenhauer's. In his *Critique of Pure Judgment*, Kant, like Schopenhauer, focuses on the response to art, in our interest in it, and that it stimulates reflective judgment. But in Kant, this interest is not passionate. It allows aspects of the thing-in-itself to emerge in our experience of art. The interesting point is that aesthetic judgment is only available because it is purposeless; it is not a self-interested response to a stimulus. The cultivation of aesthetic judgment therefore allows one to transcend desire and clinging. For Kant, this means that the mind has the power to transcend adversity and suffering through the exercise of disinterest. This resonates well with the Buddhist concept of non-attachment inherent in the practice of the middle way. But Kant is not interested in art as a form of soteriology, and so art need not function as a form of relief as it does in Schopenhauer.

There has been a good deal of recent scholarship relating Buddhist thought to Western philosophy, literary criticism, and aesthetics, all of which bears on my talk, but I can only mention some of it as I must move on to talk about music. Links have been made

---

<sup>7</sup> The Buddha came to the same conclusion when he became aware of the universality of suffering; he left his home, family, and princely status to become an ascetic. However, this did not help him reach enlightenment.

between Western and East Asian landscape painting and garden design. Classical Chinese poetry and Japanese Haiku have been compared to English Romantic poetry. Some of the prescriptions in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* by Wordsworth (not to mention to the poems within that radical book, such as “Tinturn Abbey”) resonate with Buddhist influenced poetry, such as an emphasis on rustic subjects, the description and consideration of natural phenomena and other manifestations of the sublime, and a fusion of the ordinary with the supernatural. Links to Early Buddhist art forms in India are less prevalent except in the domain of sculpture, which tell us a good deal about how Buddhist ideas were portrayed, and how the imagery changed as Buddhism spread to different cultures and advanced philosophically. The development of the burial mound into the stupa, to the Chinese pagoda as three-dimensional mandalas—that is, spiritual maps—has a semiotic parallel in Christian architecture, but, of course, not on the conceptual level.

Jumping into the 20th-century, in the last 50 years Buddhism has finally rubbed shoulders with Western religion and philosophy as Westerners have encountered and even converted to various Buddhist faiths, practicing them in Europe and America. For this reason and others, Buddhism has developed a presence in a number of cultural venues, especially in the humanities and the arts. Perhaps the most dramatic influence was felt in the Zen-influenced poetry of the Beat generation. What began as an interest and admiration of Buddhist art and literature by Allan Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, and others, led to serious consideration of Buddhist values in art and literature. It is interesting that many of the Beat poets became practicing Buddhists as they grew older, such as

Ginsberg, Philip Whalen, and Gary Snyder. Of course, Blake, Whitman, and jazz also influenced Beat poetry. But there are still links to the East here. Whitman carried on the transcendental spirit of Emerson and Thoreau, who were well aware of Indian philosophy.<sup>8</sup>

Zen Buddhism became a major theme in the music of John Cage, who learned of it from Daisetz Suzuki,<sup>9</sup> a Japanese Buddhist scholar and philosopher who popularized Buddhism in the West. In the 1950's, Suzuki gave a series of lectures on Zen and related subjects at Columbia University in New York. Like many other Westerners who became interested in Buddhism, Cage was first acquainted with Indian philosophy and art, in his case through contact with Ananda Coomaraswami, a writer on Indian art, and an Indian musician who gave him a copy of the Gospel of Shri Ramakrishna. The aesthetic content of Cage's music during the 1940s derived from "the nine permanent emotions," or *stayi bhava*, of Indian drama and dance. These are analogous to the "doctrine of affections," of Western Baroque music, but are analytically developed to construct a universal but impersonal psychology of artistic expression. Cage's music of this period, 1940-50, was admired by open-minded critics and audiences. After Cage encountered Buddhism, however, he and his music became radical and controversial. Let me quote two passages from writings that are directly influenced by Zen as expounded by Suzuki. The first is

---

<sup>8</sup> Emerson had received via a gift of over forty books on Eastern wisdom from an English scholar, Thomas Cholmondeley, which both he and Thoreau avidly read.

<sup>9</sup> Many scholars have called Suzuki's interpretations of Zen Buddhism into question on historical and doctrinal grounds. Sometimes it is forgotten that Suzuki was not a Zen historian or missionary, but a philosophical scholar.

from Cage's *Lecture on Nothing*, a title referring to the Mahayana Buddhist concept of *sunyata*, or emptiness.

I learned that the intervals have meaning; they are not just sounds but they imply in their progressions a sound not actually present to the ear.

Tonality . . . for instance: there are some progressions called deceptive cadences. The idea is this: progress in such a way as to imply the presence of a tone not actually present; then fool everybody by not landing on it.

What is being fooled? Not the ear, but the mind. The whole question is intellectual.

And from *Lecture on Something*

When a composer feels a responsibility to make, rather than accept, he eliminates from the area of possibility all those events which do not suggest at that point in time vogue of profundity. For he takes himself seriously, wishes to be taken seriously, wishes to be considered great, and he therefore diminishes his love and increases his fear and concern about what people will think. There are many serious problems confronting such an individual. He must do it better, more impressively, etc. than anyone else. And what, precisely, does this beautiful profound object, this masterpiece, have to do with Life? It has this to do with Life: that it is

separate from it. Now we see it and now we don't. When we see it we feel better, and when we are away from it, we don't feel so good. Life feels shabby and chaotic, disordered, ugly in contrast

Taken out of context, these quotations might not seem particularly or directly related to Buddhist thought; however the texts from which they come are filled with references to Zen and Taoist philosophy and even quote Zen koans.<sup>10</sup> The first quotation describes a Western music listener's response to a particular type of chord progression called a deceptive cadence. Cage is pointing out that Western musical intervals—two-note simultaneities—are syntactical, and we do not hear them as sounds, *pre se*, but as tokens of a syntax. Rather than hearing sound, we hear progression to tonal goals, but in the case of a deceptive cadence the resolution is withheld. The mind therefore tends to represent or objectify sound as structure and prevents one from hearing sound as a thing-in-itself—echoing Kant and Schopenhauer. From a Buddhist perspective, it is as I said above; most people are either attracted to, repelled by, or fantasizing about something, not attending to what is actually happening. In point of fact, the syntax of tonal music is often taught so one is trained to hear the progression of chords as teleological, as striving and desiring resolution while avoiding discord and chaos. The structure of tonal music is heard as a struggle for stability; no wonder Schopenhauer conceived of music as a model of the will. If this makes sense, then tonal music must express suffering and to participate in it is to bind one's self to suffering and dissatisfaction.

---

<sup>10</sup> One of Cage's subsequent texts is *Indeterminacy*, a series of 90 short texts—stories, epigrams, anecdotes, and quotations—that remind of the famous collections of Zen koans and/or the sayings of Zen masters.

In the second quotation, Cage says that composers suffer because they are driven to produce music that is great and enduring. They end up fearing, desiring, and fanaticizing as they compete with each other to produce masterpieces, which, if they succeed, only make their lives as lived seem less meaningful and disappointing by contrast. Again the connection to both Schopenhauer and Buddhism is unmistakable. But here there is direct reference to the cause of suffering, in as much as a composer's desire to create great enduring music—often in order to express the composer's struggle for self actualization—flies the face of impermanence and no-self.

At the time of these writings, Cage composed music that deliberately avoided any attempt to be great, monumental, or have features that would arouse desire or promote clinging. To get his ego out of the compositional process, Cage resorted to composing using chance procedures, accepting the results whatever they might be. This would also guarantee that his music could not develop a syntax that would undercut the perception of the sounds in and of themselves. In this way, Cage's music was designed as a kind of therapy, not only for Cage, but also for anyone else who might listen to it.

Let me now play an example of Cage's chance composed music. Here is a passage from his *Concert for Piano and Orchestra* of 1958.

Example 6.

Cage's compositional evolution took many more turns after this Zen influenced period, and he tends not to mention Zen or Buddhism after about 1965; instead, he becomes particularly interested in Thoreau, as perhaps a Western reincarnation of a Buddhist sage.

Certainly, Cage's critique of the composer of 20th-century music can be applied to a good deal of both popular and classical Western music, which tends to promote permanence via its repertoire of masterpieces composed and performed by musical geniuses. Such music also supports the notion of self, in as much as music sound, which is inherently ephemeral, is reified into "works" of music that "exist" independently of their origin in a particular time and place. The elitism often found in musical institutions disregards social and human responsibilities as the cult of greatness and celebrity derides ordinary people and their mundane lives. Musical structure and expression also supports desire as explained above, as well as inattention in the form of background music or illusory states when we allow music to wash over us while we fanaticize about something else on our minds.

Even so, Buddhist values need not be invoked to devastate music, for they also offer a way of saving it from its degradation as an escape from the realities of suffering. We need not set up criteria for what would constitute a music consistent with Buddhist values, as Cage attempted, even if that would permit music to explore new types of experiences presently considered musically inappropriate by some musical establishments and traditions. The problem with Cage's point of view is that it doesn't stress the perfection of attention above rejecting the project of engineering musical

desire, by composing music that presumably has no unity and expresses impermanence via compositional indeterminacy and discontinuity. While a Cage composition might function as a test of the equanimity of a person well-gone along the Buddhist path, the real problem for us as musicians and listeners is how to appreciate music, when we realize it is usually made to express and implement desire, clinging, and fantasy. That is, the problem is the same as the basic Buddhist challenge, how to understand and eliminate suffering. Buddhism asks people to examine their experiences, to attend to their perceptions and sensations as well as their thoughts in a free and non-attached open-mindedness. Meditation provides the way, by first calming the mind, then allowing it notice its activities, and then to go beyond self-consciousness to something else.

Such an approach to music would encourage listening to music with wholehearted attention. In a way, we already understand this. Certainly, there is more to the Wagner Prelude than the programming of desire; to assert that its beauty is necessarily dependent on teleological conceptions of tonal structure is to trivialize it—to reduce it to an exercise in emotional manipulation. When one attends to music so that one focuses on what one hears, rather than how it affects one's feelings and thoughts, there is so much more to experience. Not that feelings and thoughts induced by music are to be ignored, but only that they should not blot out the experience of music while we are listening. Listening to music would be like Buddhist meditation, in that one doesn't try to make the mind blank out, but rather just notes the things that pass by without letting them divert attention. The difference between music listening and meditation is that the thoughts that arise in meditation are generated by one's mind and eventually stop appearing, whereas music is

flowing on as we attend to it.<sup>11</sup> In both cases, the mind becomes calm and the difference between it and what it perceives disappears.

A new freedom of expression arises from this kind of music appreciation. Since music need not be made to arouse feelings of desire or clinging or fantasy, it is open to new forms and purposes some of which were not able to be imagined before, including experiences that might even call into question traditional ideas about time, space, and causality. According to Kant and Schopenhauer, these are three basic modalities of experience that, as invariant functions of the structure of the mind, separate us from experiencing things-in-themselves. But, if the mind is not hardwired, so to speak, it would be possible through sheer attention, not only to perceive a thing-in-itself but to become one with it. For the whole idea of postulating a thing or object in-itself is to objectify it, rather than experience it as part of other things including us. Since Buddhist thinkers have already lived in a terrain where experience is not filtered through the mind, there is much we can learn from traditional Buddhist art, once we regard it in a Buddhist way.

Japanese culture is particularly saturated with examples of Buddhist-derived concepts that are beginning to influence Western art. For instance, the idea of *Ma*, a Japanese word denoting a sense of space, is used in Japanese music and drama to mean an interval of pitch or time, not only with respect to its measure, but also to what the interval actually

---

<sup>11</sup> This is the distinction between *positive samadhi* (meditation of something) and *absolute samadhi* (meditation of emptiness) expounded by Katsuki Sekida in his book *Zen Training: Methods and Philosophy* (New York and Tokyo: Weatherhill, 1975).

feels like.<sup>12</sup> (When I say “actually,” I mean intersubjectively.) Contemporary Western musicians, of course, are alive to such a conception, but traditional Western music theories ignore anything like Ma. For example, musicians recognize and appreciate the “suchness” of each different interval; in fact, this is how we identify intervals in the first place. However, in tonal music theory the differentiation of such perceptions are reduced to only two states: whether an interval is considered consonant or dissonant, even if the theory has to treat dissonance/consonance as context-sensitive and change what intervals are consonant or dissonant as different periods and genres of music are considered. Ma also concerns how the quality of a particular patch of space or time changes when it is combined with others.

A similar case can be made for the three aspects of Japanese Haiku poetry, Yugen, Wabi, and Sabi, which correspond very roughly with mystery, poverty, and inbetweenness. Here we have sensitivity to the suchness of things rustic and in process, begun but not finished, undergoing some process of change. As with Ma, the idea is one of examining the varieties of impermanence. Our fear of change is ameliorated by appreciating the beauties brought on by it.

This emphasis on transformation and process is not unknown in the West, but the category of Becoming is usually rated as inferior to Being in much of Western philosophy. A well-known exception is Heraclitus, who embraced flux as the basis for metaphysics, as exemplified in his famous statement that you cannot step in the same

---

<sup>12</sup> Ma also denotes the distance between two points, the space surrounded by four walls, and, more generally, space/time.

river twice.<sup>13</sup> Much more recently Alfred North Whitehead, in his 1929 book, *Process and Reality*, developed the idea that the basic units of reality might not be things, but processes. Several scholars have noted strong affinities between Whitehead's "process metaphysics" and Hua-Yen Buddhism.

But a far more radical conception of process is found in the writings of the Zen-Buddhist philosopher Dogen Kigen, who lived in 13th-century Japan. Most of Dogen's texts are found in the collection of 95 essays he called the *Shobogenzo*, or "the treasury of the true dharma eye." The chapter called *U-ji*, literally translated as "Being-time," concerns the equivalence of being and time. This implies that the past and future are not part of time, although as concepts they may be thought about in the present. Time occurs only when something takes place and vice-versa. So the process of presencing or taking place is no more or less than time. As one scholar puts it: "Dharmas [that is, events] do not move in time, but are time; dharmas are not juxtaposed to each other in spatial spread, nor is time segmental in temporal sequence. (DS, p.65)." This means that the here and now is not static or instantaneous, but a dynamic duration, full of change and impermanence, what Dogen calls "passage."

"Passage" is, for example, like [the season] spring. Spring has a great many features, and these are called "passage." We should study that spring "passes" without anything outside itself. For example, the "passage" of spring always "passes through" spring.(Uji SSZ, 1:192.)

---

<sup>13</sup> He actually said that you cannot step in the same waters flowing a river twice, so he sees flux and permanence in a reciprocal relationship.

The whole idea of the future becoming the present, ending up in the past is dismissed. The “movement” from one being-time to another is discontinuous, like waking up after deep sleep or from dreams.

All this derives from Buddhist thought because in Zen and other Mahayana schools, it is said that all sentient beings need not strive for Buddha nature, exactly because they already possess it. Nevertheless Buddha nature needs to be realized. Now, for Dogen, Buddha nature is impermanence, and since the name Buddha means the awakened one, being-time is at the heart of Buddhist experience, for each awakening is being-time. Experience is either a matter of “passage” and/or waking up—flow and/or quantization. What we remember or plan/anticipate is just thinking, part of this continual presencing, which takes exertion, that is, something doesn’t just happen, it exerts itself.

Dogen’s being-time elaborates upon and improves older Buddhist theories of time in which time is also discontinuous, but in a less radical way. In Early Buddhism, time was conceived as series of minute time-slices that succeed each other too rapidly to be normally perceived, like the frames of a motion picture film. By contrast, in the West, time is thought to be modeled by the continuity of the real numbers, despite a conflict with realist theories suggested by quantum mechanics, and that the real numbers are such that given any two real numbers, there is always an infinity of numbers in between; therefore, given a specific time point, the very next instant is not specifiable. A number of

other problems—even paradoxes—about time have led some philosophers to assert that time is an illusion or it does not exist—just the opposite of Dogen’s view.

Returning to music, Dogen’s ideas lead one to understand music as time, not sounds occurring in time. Immediate and long-range structural relations are just aspects of passage. Such a conception would not disturb our present understanding of music, only enrich it. It also suggests new concepts of how a piece of music might go.

A Buddhist conception of music need not only prescribe the use of sound (even music-sound) for use in religious ritual, that is, recommend a slowly moving, simple music to calm the mind, as in so-called new age music; or, by contrast, demand an indeterminate or improvised music that is designed to didactically demonstrate the reality of impermanence. Rather, we take the middle way. A “Buddhist music” can reconfigure and enlarge the ways in which we experience our lives as sentient beings, and reinvest music and the arts with the power to teach and express experience as it can be, free and without fear.

## Bibliography

### Basic Buddhism

- Eckel, Malcolm David. *Buddhism: Origins, Beliefs, Practices, Holy Texts, Sacred Places*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002
- Fields, Rick. *How the Swans Came to the Lake: A Narrative History of Buddhism in America*. Boulder: Shambala, 1981.
- Strong, John S. *The Experience of Buddhism: Sources and Interpretations*. Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing, 1995.
- Warren, Henry Clarke. *Buddhism in Translations*. Dehli, India: Motilal Banarsidass Publishing, 1987.

### Buddhist Philosophy

- Abelson, Peter. "Schopenhauer and Buddhism," *Philosophy East and West*, 43/2 (April 1993).
- Cook, Francis H. *Sounds of Valley Streams: Enlightenment in Dogen's Zen: Translations of Nine Essays from Shobogenzo*. State University of New York Press, 1989.
- Epstein, Mark. *thoughts without a thinker*. New York: Basic Books, 1995.
- Garfield, Jay L. *Empty Words: Buddhist Philosophy and Cross-Cultural Interpretation*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- Garfield, Jay L. *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way: Nagarjuna's Mulamadhyamakakarika*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.
- Katsuki Sekida. *Zen Training: Methods and Philosophy* New York and Tokyo: Weatherhill, 1975.
- Kim, Hee-Jim. "The Reason of Words and Letters':Dogen and Koan Language." in *Dogen Studies*, William R. LaFleur, ed. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1985.
- Odin, Steve. *Process Metaphysics and Hua-Yen Buddhism: A Critical Study of Cumulative Penetration vs. Interpretation*. New York: State University of New York Press, 1982.
- Radhakrishnan, S. *Indian Philosophy*. 2 vols. Delhi and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Riepe, Dale "The Indian Influence in American Philosophy: Emerson to Moore," *Philosophy East and West*, 17/1-4 (1967).
- Saddhatissa, Hammalawa. *Buddhist Ethics*. London: George Allen and Unwin, 1970.
- Stambaugh, Joan. *Impermanence is Buddha-Nature*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990.
- Stambaugh, Joan. *The Formless Self*. Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1999.
- Takakusu, Junjiro. *The Essentials of Buddhist Philosophy*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1947.

Yu-Lan Fung. *A History of Chinese Philosophy, Volume II: The Period of Classical Learning (from the Second Century B. C. to the Twentieth Century A. D.)*. Trans. Derk Bodie. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953.

### **Buddhism, Literature, and Art**

Berthier, Francois. *Reading ZEN in the Rocks: The Japanese Dry Landscape Garden*. Trans. Graham Parkes, trans. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1997.

Garfield, Jay L. *Empty Words: Buddhist Philosophy and Cross-Cultural Interpretation*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.

Holmes, Steward W. and Chimyo Horioka. *Zen Art for Meditation*. Rutland, Vermont: Tuttle Publishing, 1973.

Humphries, Jeff. *Reading Emptiness: Buddhism and Literature*. Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1999.

Juniper, Andrew. *Wabi Sabi: The Japanese Art of Impermanence*. Rutland, Vermont: Tuttle Publishing, 2003.

Rowell, Lewis. "Ma: Time and Timing in the Traditional Arts of Japan," in *Dimensions of Time and Life: The Study of Time* 8, ed. J. T. Fraser and Marlene P. Soulsby. Madison, CT: International Universities Press, 1996.

Tonkinson, Carole, ed. *Big Sky Mind: Buddhism and the Beat Generation*. New York: Riverhead Books, 1995.

Yip, Wai-lim. *Diffusion of Distances: Dialogues between Chinese and Western Poetics*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, Oxford: University of California Press, 1993.

### **Recordings**

Example 1. *Sri Lanka: Musiques rituelles et religieuses*. Track 2, side 2, Trois chants Pirit par un groupe de Bhikkhus au Temple Aggaramaya d'Ambalangoda, a. Set Prit: kartaneeya metta sutta (extrait). LP 558 552. Ocora: Pasis, 1982.

Example 2. *Buddhist Music of the Ming Dynasty: Zhihuasi Temple, Beijing*. Track 3. Zui Wong Zi. CD VICG-5259. JVC: Los Angeles, 1993.

Example 3. *Shakuhachi (Flûte traditionnelle japonaise)*. Track 2. Mukaiji-Reibo (played by Garo Yamaguchi). CD AV 6508. Auvidis: France, 1984.

Example 4. *Buddhist Chants: Harmony of the Soul*. Track 6. The Absolute Affirmation. CD SCD 5152. Special Music Company: Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1995.

Example 5. Richard Wagner: *Tristan and Isolde*, Soloists and Berliner Philharmoniker Dirigent Herbert Von Karajan. Track 2, CD 1. Prelude. CD CDMD 7 69319 2. EMI Records: Hayes Middlesex, England, 1988.

Example 6. *John Cage: The Piano Concertos*. Track 4. Concert for Piano and Orchestra (1957-58). David Tudor, piano and live electronics, Ensemble Modern, Ingo Metzmacher, conductor. CD mode 57. Mode Records: New York, 1997.