

*Tricycle Talks*

Episode #70 with Trent Walker

“Dharma Songs and the Path to Salvation”

February 9, 2022



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**James Shaheen:** Hello and welcome to *Tricycle Talks*. I’m James Shaheen, editor-in-chief of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. You’ve just heard Trent Walker singing “Lotus Flower Offering,” a traditional Cambodian dharma song. As a scholar of Southeast Asian Buddhist music, Walker studies Theravada chanting and liturgical traditions, with a particular emphasis on the affective states that dharma songs elicit. In his article in the spring 2022 issue of *Tricycle*, “Dharma Songs to Stir and Settle,” Walker explores how dharma songs strike a balance between aesthetic expression and monastic austerity.

In today’s episode of *Tricycle Talks*, Walker performs a couple of dharma songs, and we discuss classical South Asian theories of emotion, his hopes for the future of Buddhist studies, and how music and aesthetics fit into the Buddhist path to salvation.

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**James Shaheen:** I’m here with Trent Walker, a scholar of Southeast Asian Buddhist music. Hi Trent, it’s great to have you here.

**Trent Walker:** Thank you, James. It’s a real pleasure to be here.

**James Shaheen:** So Trent, you wrote an article in the spring issue of the magazine called “Dharma Songs to Stir and Settle: The Melodies and Meaning of Cambodia’s Buddhist Music.” First of all, can you tell us what dharma songs are, and second, how you came to study them?

**Trent Walker:** The word dharma song is the way I translate this Cambodian term *thor bot*, which is another way to refer to the melodic chanting tradition in Cambodia. It’s used in a variety of Buddhist ritual settings. These Dharma songs concern a variety of themes on the Buddha’s life, gratitude to parents, the impermanence of the body, and on devotion to the three jewels. I



first came to these songs through a year that I spent in Cambodia between 2005 and 2006, when I was working for Cambodian Living Arts, which is a nonprofit that works in arts education in Cambodia. Through that organization, I was connected with Prum Ut and Koet Ran, two masters of the dharma song tradition, who lived in Kampong Speu province in rural Cambodia. When I first heard these songs, I was so moved by them. At that time, I didn't yet know Khmer, the language of Cambodia, very well, and I hadn't really studied Pali, which is another important language in the Theravada chanting tradition in Cambodia, but simply the melodies themselves and the vocal techniques involved moved me in a powerful way. They reminded me of the kinds of emotional or spiritual experiences that first drew me to Buddhism in the first place. So after getting a chance to meet these masters, they kindly invited me to live with them in their village, and I spent most of that first year that I was in Cambodia studying with these two masters in their homes and also in a class that Cambodian Living Arts had sponsored for local youth in their village, and so that gave me this first window into this tradition.

**James Shaheen:** Great. You know, you talk about being moved by these chants, by these dharma songs, and I wonder if you could tell us, as you do in the piece for the magazine, the story of Un, a novice monk whose singing ability saved him from expulsion from the community of monks, or the sangha. Can you share that story and something about what it can teach us about the dharma song tradition?

**Trent Walker:** So there's a legend that's told about perhaps the most famous 20th-century dharma song master in Cambodia. To Cambodians today, he's known as Balat Un. His personal given name is Un. As a novice monk in Wat Ounalom, one of the main temples in the capital just outside the palace, it is said that he was on the verge of getting expelled from the monastery for misbehavior. It's not really clear for what. But he was very much gifted with his voice, and it is said that one morning he was chanting the chant that he was most known for, this dharma song known as “Lotus Flower Offering,” or *botum thvay phka*, and the sound of that chant could carry



over the walls of the monastery and over to the palace, where the reigning king at that time, Sisowath Monivong, was able to hear it and asked his palace courtiers, “What is this amazing voice? I want to meet this person.” Un was both saved in a sense from expulsion from the monastery and also, eventually, later in his career, first as a monk and later as a lay chanting master, received royal recognition for his voice, his contributions to Cambodian Buddhism.

**James Shaheen:** OK, it sounds a bit like a fairy tale, yet this guy really existed and there are recordings of his voice, is that right?

**Trent Walker:** Yeah. So there’s some of the earliest recordings on vinyl that were later converted to audio cassette and then later to CD, and those formats still circulate widely in Cambodia now, over YouTube and other formats. When many Cambodians study or approach this tradition today, they return to those early recordings. The recording quality isn’t great, especially as it’s been converted across these different formats. But the miraculous qualities of his voice really come through. The particular way that he was able to adopt these melodies to his particular vocal technique is a legacy that really stands, one that when many performers today still return to for guidance, for inspiration, for a model for how to bring these texts to life.

**James Shaheen:** There was also some condition he had that lent something extraordinary to his voice, is that right?

**Trent Walker:** So what I’ve heard from a few of the elderly dharma song masters who did have a chance to meet him or hear him in person is that he didn’t necessarily chant in the posture that we might expect for a singer, either in a Western classical tradition or in the traditional Cambodian forms of singing. He had more of a hunched over kind of posture, and he was also perhaps overproducing saliva, so he was kind of, in a way, drooling constantly as he performed. This was perhaps also part of the really fluid, mellifluous quality of his voice in the way he was

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able to deftly switch from note to note and the kinds of complex trills and other kinds of ornamentation that are involved in this genre.

**James Shaheen:** I just want to say for our listeners, if you hang in, you will hear some dharma songs. But for now, I'd like to quote a few sentences from the piece that you wrote, Trent. You write, “This story of the young Un points to a mischievous streak in Buddhist monasticism, a verve for aesthetic freedom within the austere regulations of the order.” So how do Buddhist monastics navigate this tension between aesthetics and austerity? When I first heard about dharma songs, I said, “Oh, that sounds like music,” which I don't associate with the Theravada. I'm wrong. I understand that now. But why don't you say something about the tension between the aesthetics and austerities? You also talk about how the dilemma of Buddhist liturgical music is navigating a course between the twin extremes of asceticism and sensuality. Can you say something about that?

**Trent Walker:** So in the Theravada tradition of Cambodia, and this is also true in other places in South and Southeast Asia that follow the Theravada tradition, Buddhist monasteries and the monastics and lay people who make them run have multiple responsibilities in the sense that they are tending after and caring for the dharma and allowing the place for Buddhist teachings and practices to flourish and they're also looking after, guarding, taking care of, creating a space for traditional culture that may not be expressly Buddhist, including visual arts, dance, theater, and music. This is very much true in Cambodia, both today and in the past. So for instance, in Cambodia, before the onset of secular co-education for all kids in Cambodia, one of the few places that people outside of elite circles could get an education in Buddhism but also in secular subjects was in the monastery. Monasteries have long been this kind of hub for cultural knowledge. And so within that kind of twin role that monasteries have held, again, I would say jointly between monastics and lay people, there's always this kind of tension between the vinaya, the monastic regulations that monks are expected to follow and the precepts that lay people are



also expected to follow, and the importance of beauty and finding a place for the aesthetic, a place for creating lovely works of art, creating beautiful pieces of music. In a way, dharma songs, this form of melodic chant, is one way of sitting or expressing this kind of binary. On the one hand, this form of chant in all different forms of Buddhism in Cambodia is understood to be permissible for monastics to engage in. In other words, it's not considered singing in the secular sense. Only very rarely would it have musical accompaniment and never rhythmic accompany like a drum. And on the other hand, the techniques that are used, the melodies, the musical modes and scales have a quite close relationship with traditional Cambodian music such as that used in weddings and funerals and other kinds of settings. As a result, it sits at this kind of intersection. I think in the article I was exploring with thinking about the middle way that many Buddhist practitioners of art forms try to take, one between these extremes of sensuality of indulging in art or music only for the sake of that aesthetic pleasure, but also the extreme of asceticism, of cutting away all that might be beautiful and inspiring, all that might draw people into the dharma through our sense faculties, through our capacities to be inspired and moved by art and music.

**James Shaheen:** Traditions of Theravada liturgical music are rich and vast, yet you write that scholars have largely ignored them, at least in terms of their musical quality. Why do you think this area has been neglected by scholarship?

**Trent Walker:** Part of the challenge is how to approach studying a musical tradition that is essentially never written down. It has no written representation in terms of the musical notes or techniques. Another dimension is the way in which, back to this logic of is it chant? Is it singing? From the different kinds of Cambodian Buddhist perspectives, dharma songs are not songs. They're not singing; they are chanting. So because it sits in this liminal place between the worlds of music and the worlds of chant, it poses some challenges in study. But I think the broader reason for why there have been fewer studies is the legacy of what's been focused on in the study



of Theravada Buddhism in academic circles, not just in the West, also in Japan and in Southeast Asia as well, and that is, two main dimensions of the Theravada tradition have been explored. One is the textual tradition, particularly that of the Pali Tipitaka. So that's been edited and translated. Not all of the commentaries and subcommentaries, but a vast range of texts have been studied by scholars all across the world for a long time now to try to study with a clear and precise academic lens these kinds of texts, and still, there's much more to discover. And then the other dimension that's been explored with much depth in the Theravada tradition is taking an anthropological perspective, so looking at the connections between Buddhism and society in South and Southeast Asia, looking at the way life-cycle rites and other ways of connecting between local culture and Buddhist ideas and teaching are expressed and lived within Southeast Asian or Sri Lankan culture, for instance. What gets missed within this dual emphasis on textual studies and anthropology are dimensions that fall in between or that might incorporate both. One example is vernacular literature. Theravada vernacular literature has been rarely studied, not just in Western languages but also in Asian languages as well. Another area that's been rarely studied because it falls somehow in between the disciplines of studying people and studying texts is that of the chant and liturgical and musical traditions connected with Theravada Buddhism, and so again, it's because it falls in this gap, because it requires training across these different disciplines, perhaps, that it's been less studied.

**James Shaheen:** Whether we're aware of them or not, or whether we study them or not, they nonetheless play a very important role in life in Cambodia and in the Theravada world more generally. In particular, you mention their role in funerals, healing rituals, memorials, and celebratory festivals. What is it about these dharma songs that lends them so well to these moments of mourning and celebration?

**Trent Walker:** To me, there are two key archetypal rituals that dharma songs are associated with in Cambodian culture. One is deathbed rites, and the other is the consecration of Buddha images.

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In a way, both of these are moments of profound transformation, one as we as human beings face the end of our lives and transition into death, into a new rebirth, and secondly, the way in which an icon of stone or metal or wood is transformed into an embodiment of the awakened qualities of the Buddha. Those two moments of transformation are where dharma songs are most closely associated.

Partly because they are profound transformations, the chants, the liturgical patterns, and the ways in which those rituals are conducted are special, are set apart in some way, and they invite a slowing down of time and attention. In comparison to other techniques and approaches to chanting in Cambodia, dharma songs are the slowest and most complex. They require the biggest breaths and longest sustained notes. As a listener, they require the most focus, attention, and engagement just to be able to understand the words that are being recited. As such, they're really appropriate for these times of already heightened awareness and attention on everyone's part, whether it's attending to someone on their deathbed, creating that space of peace, of renunciation, of being stirred by the basic facts of life from a Buddhist perspective, that this body is impermanent, that suffering is inevitable, that whatever we hold on to as ourself is not really a permanent self, and on the other hand, for that moment of consecrating a Buddha image, of gathering everyone's aspirations, intention, and devotion to the qualities of the dharma, to the qualities of the Buddha, that make devotion to the three jewels possible.

**James Shaheen:** There's something else I wanted to ask about. You write about early on, when you were first exposed to dharma songs, you hear a song that seems to focus on what you refer to as secular grief, just like any song might, rather than the classical Buddhist path to liberation. At one point, you asked your teacher about this, and I'd just like to read her response as told in your piece. She says, “Dharma songs allow us to contemplate our existence. We use dharma songs to calm our hearts. We use them to cleanse our hearts so we can be free of our greed, hatred, and delusion. We contemplate the story so we can be stirred and change our lives for the better. Dharma songs stir and still us if we have affinity for the dharma.” So there are three words in

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there that I'd like you to unpack: they stir us, they still us, we have an affinity for the dharma.

Can you talk about stir, still, and affinity?

**Trent Walker:** Stirring is one way of translating this Pali word, *samvega*. Samvega, in a very literal sense, means agitation, means being moved, being stirred, and the specific application of this term in a Buddhist context is being moved in a way that brings about spiritual urgency, that directs us away from the bonds of worldly life and towards liberation. The kinds of moments that are described as stirring, that are described as bringing about this experience of samvega, include encountering the impermanence of the body, whether our own or that of another, and encountering the life of the Buddha and places or relics associated with the Buddha. For instance, this word *samvega* frequently occurs in Pali and Sanskrit biographies of the Buddha in describing the Buddha's experience in being taken on that chariot tour outside of the palace to encounter an old man, a sick man, a dead man, and a monk. That experience was one of samvega.

Another way in which this term *samvega* appears is, for instance, in the Mahaparinibbana Sutta, the last sermon of the Buddha in the Theravada tradition. In the Pali version of that text, the Buddha describes four places that should give rise to samvega. This is the place where the Buddha was born, where the Buddha attained enlightenment, where he preached his first sermon, and where he passed away. These, of course, over the centuries became very important pilgrimage sites. So dharma songs, many of them are oriented towards samvega, towards bringing about this experience of being stirred.

Samvega, though, also has a complimentary experience, and that is this experience of being stilled, a kind of calm after the storm of samvega, if you will. This word in Pali is *pasada*, or *prasada* in Sanskrit. Etymologically, the root of this word means to sink down. If one can imagine a glass filled with muddy water, if allowed to settle, those particles will gradually sink down to the bottom of the glass, leaving the water above bright and clear. And it's this sense of stilling, of brightness, of clarity that is the complement to samvega, the complement to being



stirred. In Cambodian, in Khmer, this word is usually translated as *chreah thla*. Chreah thla means to be cleansed and to be bright, and it describes the quality of heart that one has in devotion to the three jewels. And so this feeling of pasada, this feeling of clarity and brightness, is one that's very much connected to giving in the Buddhist tradition, to generosity. It's the ideal state of mind to engage in meritorious acts. So once we've been stirred to see the impermanence, the instability of life or moved and inspired by Buddhist teachings or stories, the kind of clarity and stillness that arises from that is thought to be the most efficacious mind state to engage in acts of charity, of meditation, of taking precepts, of participating in rituals, and more. And so another set of dharma songs are focused on cultivating this very sense of stilling or pasada. The songs might focus on the life of the Buddha, on devotion to the Buddha, on the very act of, say, offering a lotus flower to an altar, and provide this complement to the songs that are focused on samvega. There's also a very interesting musical distinction between these two kinds of songs that we could explore later.

For the third term, affinity, or karmic affinity, this is a translation of a Pali word *nissaya*. Nissaya literally means dependence. When ordaining as a monk or a nun, one is expected to ask for dependence from one's teacher, to set one up into this kind of relationship with a teacher. That's a key ingredient, say, in the ordination ceremony in Cambodia. But the use of this term *nissaya* in Cambodian language and culture is quite a bit more extensive, and it expands to express this sense of karmic affinity that might be described in different ways in other Buddhist contexts, sometimes through a Sanskrit term like *vasana*, this perfumation or sense of connection from deep in our consciousness or from deep within the kind of karmic conditioning that we may have. That's one way of expressing it. Or in an East Asian context with a Chinese term like causes and conditions to also describe this kind of karmic affinity that we might experience towards the dharma, towards other people, towards a particular place, or even towards a particular teaching or chant. In Khmer culture, people are often referring to *nissaya*, often describing that in coming to a certain place and connecting with a certain person, in hearing Buddhist teachings in a certain way, they feel this sense of unexplained connection that in some



ways must be connected to past actions, whether in this life or in more distant previous ones. That same term *nissaya* is also used to describe the different ways that people respond to Buddhist teachings when they hear them. So the idea that's expressed in a number of different Buddhist texts in the Theravada tradition, going back to the Pali canon and its commentaries, that human beings are, in a sense, like lotus flowers in a pond. Some are on the surface already ready to receive the sun's rays, that is, the dharma. Others are just below the surface and need just some time or prodding. Others are deeper below in the water. And this is one way of expressing the ways in which people respond differently to different Buddhist teachings. Not everyone will find Buddhist teachings attractive or appealing, and sometimes that's connected to the particular point in life that each of us may be. In a Cambodian Buddhist context, this way in which people feel more or less attracted or moved by Buddhist teachings is connected to this idea of *nissaya*. So from my teacher's perspective, Koet Ran's perspective, she understands that dharma songs aren't going to be something that everyone can connect with. But when that connection is there, then it's possible that the intended experiences of being stirred or being stilled can arise.

**James Shaheen:** Oh, that's a wonderful answer. That explains a lot. I may be mistaken, but I think in the article, you say *samvega* and *pasada* don't often appear together in context. Is that correct, and was that a development that happened later?

**Trent Walker:** In the Pali canon, they don't often appear together in context, but they begin to appear together in the commentarial literature and in later Pali literature. So by the time the long chronicle texts were written in Sri Lanka, such as the *Mahavamsa*, we see these two terms paired together, describing already the ideal response to hearing a Buddhist text. So it's not there in the very beginning of the Buddhist tradition, as far as I can tell, but as texts and commentaries and new compositions in Pali and other Indic languages developed, these terms became joined together.



**James Shaheen:** In the article, you draw upon classical South Asian studies of emotions and aesthetics, particularly what’s known as *rasa* theory. Can you give us some background on *rasa* theory and how it plays out in dharma song performance?

**Trent Walker:** In the Indian theatrical and literary and aesthetic tradition, particularly for writings in Sanskrit, beginning around the middle to the end of the first millennium in the Common Era, this concept of *rasa*, which literally means juice or flavor, developed as a way to describe the impact that literature, art, dance, theater has on the listener. It was developed into very sophisticated kinds of theories by thinkers such as Bharata Muni and Abhinav Gupta and others who worked within Indian philosophical traditions, largely in a Brahmanical or Hindu context, to describe what’s happening in this moment of reception. Part of the emphasis in Indian *rasa* theory is the idea that particular emotions or aesthetic experiences can be enjoyed or appreciated, even when they’re conventionally unpleasant in some way, such as disgust or fear. These are kinds of experiences that we might seek out in experiencing art or film, say, but we might not ordinarily say that those are pleasurable or happy in some way. In Cambodia, *rasa* theory as such is not explicitly invoked. The term *rasa* and its Cambodian pronunciation *rasa*, as well as variants, are used when discussing literature or art, but not in the full developed sense we see in Sanskrit literature and the kinds of South Asian developments of *rasa* theory. For me, in this article, I wanted to bring to the Cambodian context a set of theories that I thought were useful for explaining or for understanding what was happening with terms like *samvega* and *pasada*, to see them in some ways as aesthetic experiences that had become idealized in the Buddhist tradition as a whole and in the Cambodian tradition, more specifically, and to understand them as states or experiences that can be explicitly cultivated. Even within the case of *samvega*, it’s not understood to be a pleasant or peaceful state but nevertheless one that has a real importance on the Buddhist path.



**James Shaheen:** You write that the centrality of samvega and pasada in the dharma song tradition offers “a new way of understanding Theravada soteriology in aesthetic terms.” Can you tell us what you mean by that? Where do samvega and pasada fit in the path to salvation?

**Trent Walker:** Sometimes samvega and pasada are framed as the beginning of the path to liberation. So we see that in the context of the Buddha’s life. In his visit outside the palace and his encounter with the four divine messengers, that arising of samvega is in one way the beginning of the Buddhist path in his last life is Siddhartha Gautama. On the other hand, of course, it was just a reminder of what he had cultivated over many, many lifetimes. Pasada, too, can be thought of something that’s at the beginning that’s an initial inspiration. So pasada is particularly associated with the inspiration to give, to support Buddhist communities, to give in response to Buddhist teachings, to make offerings to the sangha or to build a monastery. All of those kinds of acts are very much associated with this sense of pasada. But we might also think of that as a building block towards the final goal of liberation. So that’s one way of framing samvega and pasada is as an opening, a gateway into the path.

Another way of framing it, though, is considering the end of the path, particularly at the end of life. In many different Buddhist traditions, the last moments of one’s life are thought to be particularly important for determining the next rebirth destination, and many Buddhist practices have developed around the deathbed in terms of cultivating the appropriate state of mind. In the Cambodian context, these dharma songs of stirring and stilling that evoke samvega and pasada are thought to be particularly efficacious in that context. And so by contemplating the impermanence of the body while its very impermanence is so visible in the process of death and bringing to mind one’s devotion to the three jewels, bringing and cultivating this state of brightness, of clarity, of stilling that’s thought to be so important in the final moments of life is also very present. In the manuscripts, usually this form of traditional bark pulp paper manuscripts folded in an accordion style that are used to transmit dharma songs in Cambodia, in addition to the Dharma songs, there are also aspirations written by the scribe where particular dharma songs



may end with aspirations for those participating in the ritual or for someone on their deathbed. In the Cambodian context, particularly prior to the 20th century, the most important aspiration is that of Buddhahood. The aspiration for nirvana is also there and one that might be more expected in a Theravada context, but particularly from the 15th to the 19th centuries in Cambodia, the aspiration to become a fully awakened buddha and teach others through that path in the future is a core aspiration that's emphasized that rests on this foundation of samvega and pasada.

**James Shaheen:** So I'm curious, you not only study and analyze these songs, but you've also memorized and learned to perform them yourself. What is the experience of actually performing it as opposed to simply listening to it?

**Trent Walker:** For me, when I perform or simply chant for myself at home, the experience is a bit different because the act of chanting, for me at least, is usually a very calming and centering one, and I may be less attuned to what it's like to listen to these chants and particularly to follow some of the emotionally powerful stories they tell or the kinds of beautiful or terrifying images they evoke. When I'm chanting, that's present, but it's a little bit in the background. My focus is more on the breath, the voice, the experience of chanting itself, which is a different kind of experience, I think, than listening to these chants.

**James Shaheen:** Well, since we've been talking about this as chants that have the ability to stir us or still us, I wonder if you could give us a sample of this, if you could perform one of the dharma songs for our listeners, and we'll get a sense ourselves of whether or not we have an affinity for the dharma.

**Trent Walker:** So I'll begin with a song that's focused on the stirring dimension. In fact, this is one of the ones that you'd mentioned earlier in connection with my teacher Koet Ran. It was the question that I asked her about this song, “Orphan's Lament”: why is this song a dharma song? It



seems to be the grief of a child who's lost her mother. What about this song connects it to the dharma? It was her answer to that that you quoted earlier. So I'll just do two stanzas of this song. I'll do the first stanza in Khmer, and then I'll do a translation of that stanza into English, and this particular translation that I've done follows the same meter and rhyme pattern as the original Khmer, so it can be performed in the same melody. [Chants dharma song]

**James Shaheen:** That was wonderful, Trent. Thank you. So why don't you tell us a little bit about the experience of singing that? I certainly know the effect it had on me and probably our listeners. I think samvega might be an understatement, even. So why don't you say something about that?

**Trent Walker:** For me, when I recite this song, I think particularly of my teacher, Koet Ran, and her voice and her perspective. She has lived a long, difficult, and beautiful life. She now has, I think, over 35 grandchildren, and in the years after the Khmer Rouge regime that lasted from 1975 to 1979 in Cambodia, she lost her sight in a way that was really connected to the grief and loss of that period. Her approach to singing and performing dharma songs is always grounded within the experiences of loss and also deep devotion that she's had in her life. Partly, whenever I sing this particular song, I hear that. I feel the ways in which my voice will never match up, never measure up, to hers, but also the gift of her warm teaching, the way she would meet and recognize me through placing her hands on my face, the way her sighted husband is always there at her side with a handwritten book of dharma songs to remind her of any words in case she forgets a stanza mid-song, so that whole scene is always present for me when I perform this song.

**James Shaheen:** Well, it was really quite beautiful and moving. I wonder if you could say something about the melody. I hesitate to get all analytical again after hearing that, yet I wonder how the sounds themselves evoke specific emotional states.

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**Trent Walker:** So the particular melody used for this song, as well as for many other chants that are oriented towards samvega in the Cambodian context, is usually a dominant mode, or a mixolydian mode or a Dorian kind of mode. So in perhaps more understandable terms, the particular notes of the scale that are used include the root, a minor third, sometimes also a major third, the fourth, the fifth, and a dominant or flat seven. Those are the main notes that are used. Occasionally, a few other notes are used as well. In the Cambodian context, these kinds of scales are associated with more plaintive, more melancholy kinds of songs, and I think for that reason within the Cambodian cultural context that they were chosen. Thinking about the reception for those not familiar with Khmer culture or music, the particular scale that's used is quite close to the minor blues scale within particularly the African American heritage of blues music, but to me there is this resonance with other musical traditions around the world that use similar kinds of scales that tell stories in similar ways. I recall distinctly somebody telling me that they had played a CD of dharma songs, including some with this kind of melody, to an elderly white American woman, I think in Massachusetts, and when she heard the songs, she exclaimed, “Am I supposed to die now?” There's a way in which, even without understanding the words, without understanding the particular cultural context, that maybe these melodies have a resonance that extends beyond that, and their association with deathbed rituals, with funerals, with rites of memorials, and grief are really present. So this particular song is most associated with being recited at a funeral, particularly at the funeral of someone who's a parent. The lyrics beyond the first stanza are really focused on the experience of a child seeing and witnessing the body of their parent.

**James Shaheen:** Yeah, I was going to ask you about the universality of this music or music in general. I wonder if you could say something about that. When you arrived in Cambodia, what kind of musical background did you have?



**Trent Walker:** I was trained in classical music and jazz growing up, singing, playing the trumpet, also playing the piano. That experience was, I think, always with me when I was studying music in Cambodia. I studied some secular forms of music as well, instrumental and vocal, in a way in preparation to study dharma songs. That was an advantage. It made it easier to learn some of these melodies because I had a kind of musical background already. On the other hand, I think there's a way in which that could have been an obstacle or still is an obstacle, and the obstacle I'm referring to is that I have approached this tradition with the bias of the musical tradition I was trained in growing up. That includes the tuning, the approach to breath and melody that's present when I sing in this Cambodian style, despite the best efforts of my teachers in Cambodia to have me sing exactly the way they did. I think that's something that I'm always conscious of when I do perform. My main teacher, Prum Ut, passed away in 2009. It was really fortunate that I was able to record many, many hours of him performing so that I and others of his students can always return to his voice and see that ah, for this particular line, this particular stanza, the voice rises or falls there, or he adds a particular ornamentation, that there's always a particular template or model to return to. That, for me, is always important.

**James Shaheen:** I don't want to impose too much, but I wondered if there was a *pasada* dharma song you could sing. I need to be stilled now.

**Trent Walker:** Great, so I'll say a few words about it, and then I'll chant. “Lotus Flower Offering,” or *botum thvay phka*, the same chant I mentioned in the context of the story of the novice Un and the king being moved by his performance of this dharma song, is one that's very closely associated with *pasada*, with stilling, and that partially is related to its melody, which is a major pentatonic scale, and it's also very much connected with the words of this particular chant. This song is most closely associated with Buddha image consecration rituals, which is an all-night, and into the early morning, ritual performance traditionally in Cambodia. In the early evening, a certain set of chants are performed then, a series of dharma songs that invite the relics



and perfections of the Buddha to come inhabit the image. Then, as the evening gives in to night, a long song called “The Defeat of Mara” that describes the Buddha’s life up to the point of his awakening and in particular his defeat of Mara, in the Cambodian context, invoking the earth goddess as she washes away the armies of Mara. Then after that’s complete, marks of the image have been implanted, the first text that’s used to worship the newly consecrated image is “Lotus Flower Offering.” In other words, a set of lotus flowers are offered to the new image and this text is chanted. Like many dharma songs, the chant is exceptionally melismatic. Melismatic means that there are many notes in proportion to the number of words or syllables. Because the chant is so long and melismatic, if I were to perform the whole thing, which is about 40 stanzas, it would take three hours, so I’m just going to perform a stanza. This time I’ll do it just in Khmer, but the words are very simply, “Fresh blooms of lotus, I offer them with joy. With hands cupped like buds, I lift them to my brow.” [Chants dharma song]

**James Shaheen:** What drew me to this piece initially when it was shown to me was that we often talk about samvega and pasada as ideas, as concepts, as things. We then try to think in our lives, “Where have we experienced this?” But just the immediacy of the experience induced by listening to this I found remarkable. It’s the actual experience of samvega or pasada. I think only this sort of musical prayer or lament can actually induce that just sitting here listening. It’s amazing. So any hopes for the future of the study of Buddhist aesthetics and performance?

**Trent Walker:** I think one key aspect lies in teaching. As someone who teaches in a university setting, I’m always thinking about in that academic setting, how do I give students a chance to engage in a deep and meaningful way, not necessarily in a religious or confessional way, in a deep and meaningful way with the traditions that we might be learning about in class? For me, when teaching about Buddhism in Southeast Asia, music is a really key element of that. For students who spend a lot of time reading or engaging with Buddhism as expressed in words, in texts, in textbooks, it’s a real relief sometimes to be able to not engage with the eyes at all and

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just focus on listening and to use that as a vehicle for, in the case of the classroom, intellectual exploration of this tradition, to find new ways of listening that can support the other kinds of inquiry we do in the classroom. Since I see what happens in the classroom as really integral to what happens in research in the field of Buddhist studies, to me, beginning there is essential for making space. I think the other dimension is reminding everyone who studies Buddhism in an academic way that even if they don't have training in music theory or in a particular discipline of music, that they too can learn the kinds of simple but powerful techniques for analyzing what they hear, for writing down the responses to what they hear, for describing the sounds and the silences of Buddhist rituals and liturgical performance, and that can be much more a part of how we describe both what happens in particular Buddhist spaces and societies as well as the very audible lives of texts we study.

**James Shaheen:** Well, Trent Walker, thanks so much for joining us. For our listeners, be sure to read Trent's article in the spring issue of the magazine at [tricycle.org/magazine](http://tricycle.org/magazine). Thank you, Trent.

**Trent Walker:** Thank you, James.

**James Shaheen:** You've been listening to *Tricycle Talks* with Trent Walker. We'd love to hear your thoughts about the podcast, so write us at [feedback@tricycle.org](mailto:feedback@tricycle.org) to let us know what you think. *Tricycle Talks* is produced by As It Should Be Productions and Sarah Fleming. I'm James Shaheen, editor-in-chief of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. Thanks for listening!