

# Melodic Meditation: Buddhist Chant as a Vehicle for Choral Composition

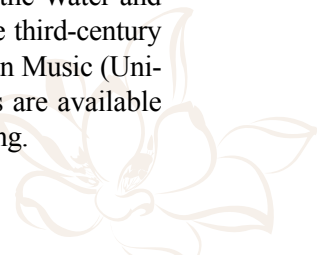


## Reed Criddle

Director of Choral Activities, Utah Valley University

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**D**r. **Reed Criddle** is currently Director of Choral Activities at Utah Valley University, where he conducts the Chamber Choir and Men's Choir. Recipient of the UVU School of the Arts Faculty Senate Teaching Excellence Award, Dr. Criddle also teaches advanced choral conducting, private voice, and private conducting. He has served as president of the Utah chapter of the American Choral Directors Association and board member for the National Collegiate Choral Organization. As a U.S. Fulbright Senior Scholar in Taiwan, Dr. Criddle researched Buddhist chant at the Fo Guang Shan Institute of Humanistic Buddhism (Kaohsiung) and Dharma Drum Institute of Liberal Arts (Taipei). His forthcoming book *Chanting the Medicine Buddha Sutra*, published by A-R Editions in their Recent Researches in the Oral Traditions of Music series, is a full musical transcription and new English translation of monastic liturgy from the Water and Land Dharma Service. Additionally, his pioneering translation of the third-century Chinese musical treatise by philosopher Ruan Ji is published by Asian Music (University of Texas Press). His choral compositions and arrangements are available through Earthsongs, Hal Leonard, and Santa Barbara Music Publishing.



## Introduction

I am humbled to return to this holy place to address you. It seems like just yesterday that I was here for the 5<sup>th</sup> Annual Symposium!

During the 2017–2018 academic year, it was my good fortune to spend five months in Taiwan researching Buddhist chant as a U.S. Fulbright Senior Scholar. My primary host institution was the Institute of Humanistic Buddhism here at Fo Guang Shan and I worked closely with the capable leaders of the Institute, most notably Venerable Miao Guang. I spent a majority of those five months living in the residence attached to 普賢殿 (Samantabhadra Shrine) on these Fo Guang Shan headquarters monastic grounds. Morning and evening chanting services in the Main Shrine were a typical part of my routine, as was the thrice-daily mealtime chanting.

I arrived in November 2017 with the explicit intention of attending and recording the week-long Water and Land Dharma Service that attracts thousands of devotees each year. I spent weeks studying the two-hour long Medicine Buddha Sutra service at the Great Compassion Shrine. Then I created a full transcription of the musical elements of that service, complete with Western musical notation and a line-by-line, side-by-side new English translation.

## Chant of the Sixth Patriarch

I feel honored to bring my research of Fo Guang Shan chanting and subsequent creative output as a composer full circle by presenting to you today three musical compositions that were inspired by Buddhist chants that I learned here at Fo Guang Shan. This is a case study for the spread of Humanistic Buddhism through modern notions of musical transmission of the dharma. My efforts are intended to bring the teachings of Humanistic Buddhism into secular schools globally.

Back home in the United States, I am a professor of music

## Chant of the Sixth Patriarch

Adagio (♩ = 54) Traditional Buddhist melody  
arr. Reed Criddle

The score is arranged for Soprano (S), Alto (A), Tenor (T), Bass (B), Violin (Vln.), Finger Cymbal, Wooden Fish, and Piano (Pno.). The tempo is Adagio with a quarter note equal to 54 beats per minute. The music is in 4/4 time and begins with a piano (*p*) dynamic. The vocal parts sing the Chinese characters 'Wu yi wu yi' (無一物一無物). The violin part starts with a piano (*p*) dynamic and later moves to mezzo-forte (*mf*). The piano accompaniment also starts piano (*p*) and includes a section marked *pp* (pianissimo) in the lower register. Percussion includes Finger Cymbal and Wooden Fish. The score concludes with a *mp* (mezzo-piano) dynamic for the vocal parts and a *pp* dynamic for the piano.

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*note 360, like Debussy*

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S Solo *mf*

Pu - ti ben wu shu, ming jing yi fei tai, ben -  
 菩 提 本 無 樹, 明 鏡 亦 非 台, 本 -

*p*

S

Pu - ti ben wu shu, ming jing yi fei tai,  
 提 本 無 樹, 明 鏡 亦 非 台,

A

Pu - ti ben wu shu, ming jing yi fei tai,  
 本 無 樹, 明 鏡 亦 非 台,

T

Pu - ti ben wu shu, ming jing yi fei tai,  
 菩 提 本 無 樹, 明 鏡 亦 非 台,

B

ti, Pu - ti ben wu shu, ming jing yi fei tai,  
 提 提 本 無 樹, 明 鏡 亦 非 台,

Pno.

15

S Solo *mp*

lai wu yi wu, he chu re chen ai?  
 來 無 一 物, 何 處 惹 塵 埃?

*mp*

S

ben lai wu yi wu.  
 本 來 無 一 物。

A

ben lai wu yi wu.  
 本 來 無 一 物。

T

ben lai wu yi wu.  
 本 來 無 一 物。

B

ben lai wu yi wu. Pu -  
 本 來 無 一 物。 菩 -

Pno. *mp*

and director of choirs at Utah Valley University. I am also an active composer. In an effort to diversify performance literature of choirs worldwide, I began seeking opportunities to compose or arrange choral music on Buddhist themes. From my first exposure to Buddhist chant as a participant in Fo Guang Shan's summer monastic camp fourteen years ago, I arranged my first choral composition based on the tune of the Evening Bell Service. I set the text often associated with this tune, the famed poem by Sixth Patriarch Huineng: “菩提本無樹” (“Bodhi is fundamentally without any tree”). The climax of this piece is on the repeated lyrics “無一物,” or “there is no thing,” which refers to the principles of emptiness, non-self, impermanence, and non-duality. This piece is entitled *Chant of the Sixth Patriarch*, and is scored for violin and soprano solos, mixed SATB choir, and piano.

To view *Chant of the Sixth Patriarch* on YouTube:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F3UJhx3r0t8>

### **A Challenge Issued**

At the conclusion of this conference two years ago, I was speaking with Venerable Miao Guang, of the Fo Guang Shan Institute of Humanistic Buddhism, about the future of Buddhist music. She rightly noted that music at Fo Guang Shan has mostly remained in a sinological sphere. The liturgy, chanting, and extra-liturgical musics of Fo Guang Shan temples have mostly remained Chinese in style, language, and instrumentation. The collection of pitches in the vast majority of the chanting may be described as the musical mode of the pentatonic scale, which contains five notes. This was also the tonal approach of *Chant of the Sixth Patriarch*, maintaining a Chinese musical language.

As a footnote of historical contextualization, it was not always this way. Early attempts by Fo Guang Shan founder Venerable Master Hsing Yun and his contemporaries Masters Hongyi and

Taixu of Minnan Buddhist Seminary, as well as others, sought to fold in musical vernacular from Western musical genres. This resulted in collections of new devotional songs written by Chinese Buddhists trained in Western classical music. In the 1950s, Buddhist musicians Yang Yongpu, Li Zhonghe, and Wu Juche formed a committee to write a hymnal for Fo Guang Shan.<sup>1</sup> These compositions formed the core repertoire of the Ilan Chanting Buddhist Youth Choir, which toured prominently and publicly in Taiwanese concert halls.

These mid-20th century Buddhist composers appropriated Christian hymnody and Western art song in several ways. In some instances, they took complete compositions of famed Western composers like Vincenzo Bellini, Ludwig van Beethoven, or William S. Hays, and set new Buddhist lyrics to those composers' tunes. Or in other instances, they borrowed the melody or the generic four-part harmonic and melodic structure of Christian hymns to create Buddhist hymns.

These hymns used the "Major" Ionian church mode, whose origins may be traced back to the time of Catholic Pope Gregory I of the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> century. To put things in perspective here in Asia, Pope Gregory lived during the time of the Sui dynasty, which comes directly before the great Tang dynasty. Gregorian chant, which forms the melodic basis of Western musical language, was codified during that time. It is this musical tradition that the founder of Fo Guang Shan was drawing on in his early cultural appropriation of evangelical Christian hymns. Thus, a Chinese-flavor of pentatonicism has not always been the norm in Buddhist music at Fo Guang Shan.

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1 Pi-yen Chen, "Buddhist Chant, Devotional Song, and Commercial Popular Music: From Ritual to Rock Mantra," *Ethnomusicology* 49, no. 2, (Spring/Summer, 2005): 266-286.

In the last few decades, a separate genre of Buddhist music has developed: commercial or popular Buddhist songs. These songs comprise dozens of CD albums and are not part of the liturgy. While the lyrics contain Buddhist messages, they resemble popular Chinese songs on the radio in their instrumentation, vocal color, and style. This commercialization of the dharma can be heard over loudspeakers throughout Fo Guang Shan monastery, especially during large festivals for the public, at the temple bookstore, or at the Pilgrim's Lodge restaurant. Although these songs resemble Western pop music, they are distinctly Chinese in style.

### **A Buddhist Blessing**

Given this three-pronged history of liturgical chant, devotional hymns, and commercial songs, I came to Fo Guang Shan interested in future horizons of Buddhist music. My motivation for composing the next piece was a challenge issued by Venerable Miao Guang. She astutely noted that the spread of Mahayana Buddhism relies primarily on Chinese cultural practices and thus does not easily reach non-Chinese populations. She invited me to transform the poetry and musical language of Fo Guang Shan chanting to more readily speak to Western audiences. Perhaps this could become a frontier of exploration for the future of Buddhist music. I chose to harmonize the Fo Guang Shan *Transference of Merit* chant, which concludes most rituals and services at Fo Guang Shan monasteries and branch temples. In composing the four voice parts, I let the voice-leading and harmonies respond to the melody with the Buddhist philosophical concept of flow: as river water encounters rocks, it flows over and around them and carries on without a struggle. Not surprising, the resultant idiom that emerged resembles jazz, with soft non-functional harmony and a comfortable dose of unresolved dissonance.

The lyrics of *A Buddhist Blessing* are a poetic translation from Chinese liturgy with the exception of an inserted allusion to

Japanese Zen teachings. The axiom “Empty your cup!” refers to a specific Zen Buddhist parable, or Ko’an.

Fo Guang Shan monastics and devotees (and those acquainted with the daily chanting) will, of course, recognize this tune. It is the 迴向偈 (Transference of Merit verse) also referred to colloquially by its first line 慈悲喜捨. The melody of this chant has hardly been altered, though in this new genre it may seem buried in the vocal jazz texture. The only differences to the melody are a few spots where I changed rhythms to match the English syllabification of my translation.

For those not familiar with this chant, it is a celebration of virtues that strengthen humanity on earth and in heaven. It is also a Buddhist vow to gift one’s merit to the benefit of others.

To view *A Buddhist Blessing* on YouTube:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GAuPm7-qd1g>

**A BUDDHIST BLESSING**  
REED CRIDDLE

CHINESE LYRICS BY MASTER VENERABLE XING YUN (c. 1907)  
TRANSLATED INTO ENGLISH AND ADAPTED BY THE COMPOSER

BUDDHIST MELODY BASED ON A  
FO GUANG SHAN (TAIWAN) MONASTIC CHANT

The musical score is arranged for four voices: Soprano, Alto, Tenor, and Bass. Each part begins with a treble clef and a 4/4 time signature. The lyrics are: MAY KIND - NESS, COM - PAS - SION, SOY, AND. The melody is simple and repetitive, with a slight variation in the bass line at the end.



The musical score is presented in three systems, each with four staves for Soprano (S), Alto (A), Tenor (T), and Bass (B). The lyrics are written below the notes.

**System 1:**

Soprano: E - ODA - NI - MI - TY COM - SOME YOUR DREE - EST DAYS AND  
 Alto: E - ODA - NI - MI - TY COM - SOME DREE DAYS  
 Tenor: E - ODA NI - MI - TY COM - SOME DREE DAYS  
 Bass: E - ODA - NI - MI - TY COM - SOME DREE DAYS

**System 2:**

Soprano: SEIGHT - EST NIGHTS MAY KNOW - LEDGE  
 Alto: AND SEIGHT NIGHTS MAY KNOW - LEDGE  
 Tenor: AND SEIGHT NIGHTS MAY KNOW - LEDGE  
 Bass: AND SEIGHT NIGHTS MAY KNOW - LEDGE

**System 3:**

Soprano: OF LIFE'S DE - LU - SIONS AND IM - PEE - MA - NENCE AND THE IN - TER - CON -  
 Alto: OF LIFE'S DE - LU - SIONS AND IM - PEE - MA - NENCE AND THE IN - TER - CON -  
 Tenor: OF LIFE'S DE - LU - SIONS AND IM - PEE - MA - NENCE AND THE IN - TER - CON -  
 Bass: OF LIFE'S DE - LU - SIONS AND IM - PEE - MA - NENCE AND THE CON -



### Mighty Flame Dharani

Fo Guang Shan founder Venerable Master Hsing Yun believes in the modernization and popularization of Buddhist music. He proposes the creation of musical ensembles to teach the Dharma, of fostering the talents of new generations of Buddhist composers, and of making Buddhist music singable for the masses and not just monastics. He further remarked:

In addition to the defining techniques and styles of ceremonial Buddhist music, we can begin to mix the solemn spirit of Buddhist melodies with some of the qualities of contemporary music, taking the modernization of Buddhist music to a whole new level.<sup>2</sup>

Encouraged by this progressive sentiment, I next composed *Mighty Flame Dharani* 消災吉祥神咒 (the second of the Ten

<sup>2</sup> Venerable Master Hsing Yun, “Buddhism and Music,” *Buddhism in Everyday Life*, October 27, 2017, <https://www.fgsite.org/buddhism-and-music-2/>.

Short Mantras 十小咒). With this piece, I strove to create Buddhist choral art whose primary design is not a display of beauty, but rather to give singers and audience members a meditative experience. As Venerable Master Hsing Yun said of chanting: “Buddhist *fanbei* do not seek to elevate or excite the emotions of those who hear or sing them. Their goal is the opposite: to conserve emotional energy, calm thoughts, reduce desire, and allow practitioners to illuminate the mind and see their true nature.”<sup>3</sup> To achieve this, I set a Sanskrit text,<sup>4</sup> combining spoken word with sung melodies. The chanting becomes untangled as the work develops, until at the end its simplicity speaks unencumbered. Through the use of complex musical canons and layered over the pulse of the wooden fish dharma instrument, I re-create the traditional chanting sonic experience of 海潮音 (the sound of ocean waves). Choristers will only be successful at accurately performing this composition if they are mindful of the steady wooden fish pulse and remain undistracted by the cacophony of sounds around them. In this sense, not only is a mindful state needed to experience the meditative quality of the piece, but a mindful state is essential for an accurate and unified execution of the work. If even one singer’s mind strays, the whole piece will rhythmically unravel like a piece of yarn from a sweater.

To view this *Mighty Flame Dharani* on YouTube:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kkIDXiTicxU>

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3 Venerable Master Hsing Yun, “Buddhism and Music,” *Buddhism in Every Step*, 2014, [https://archive.org/stream/BuddhismInEveryStepBooklets/BuddhismAndMusic\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/BuddhismInEveryStepBooklets/BuddhismAndMusic_djvu.txt)

4 I am indebted to Professor Deng Wei-Jen of the Dharma Drum Institute for the Liberal Arts (Taipei) for instructing me in Sanskrit enunciation and am thrilled that he is attendance at this conference to witness the fruits of our collective labors.

**REED CRIDDLE**

# MIGHTY FLAME DHARANI



*A Buddhist recitation dramatized for SATB chorus and wood block*

Composed at Dharma Drum Mountain Monastery & Institute for Liberal Arts  
Jinshan, Taiwan  
February 2018

### MIGHTY FLAME DHARANI

Reed Criddle

$\text{♩} = 110$   
*mp*

Soprano: Na - - - - - mah sa - man -

Alto: *mp* Na - - - - - mah, na - mah

Tenor: *p* Na - - - - - mah, na - mah,

Bass: *pp*

Hrm!

(\*Add solo recitation of last verse here both times, out of tempo)

Temple Blocks  
(or woodenfish/wood block)  
*p* (wood block dynamic does not change)

4

S: ta, sa - man - ta, Na - mah sa - man - ta,

A: sa - man - ta, sa - man - ta, Na - mah sa - man - ta,

T: Na - mah sa - man - ta,

B: (m)

24

S: a - la, jv - a - la jv - a - la pra - jv - a - la pra - jv - a - la, pra - jv - a - la pra - jv - a - la

A: jv - a - la jv - a - la pra - jv - a - la pra - jv - a - la, pra - jv - a - la pra - jv - a - la ti - s -

T: la, jv - a - la jv - a - la pra - jv - a - la pra - jv - a - la, pra - jv - a - la pra - jv - a - la ti - s -

B: jv - a - la, jv - a - la jv - a - la pra - jv - a - la pra - jv - a - la, pra - jv - a - la pra - jv - a -

28



## Conclusion

I believe the future of Buddhist music is bright. I envision the next generation of Buddhist music to be increasingly pluralistic, increasingly innovative, and increasingly inclusive of local cultures around the world. Traditional chanting in Chinese Buddhist style will surely remain the primary lifeline of liturgical activities at Fo Guang Shan. However, as disparate Fo Guang Shan temple communities and engaged musicians around the world seek self-expression, a renaissance of creativity might give way to a diversification of musical activity. In the spreading of the dharma, it would be in the best interest of the Fo Guang Shan leadership to encourage linguistic and musical adaptation of Buddhist chanting so it may speak to an increasingly global audience. It is my hope that these compositions that are already being performed around the world will help bring about this renaissance in Buddhist music!