

*Artistic and Ethical Considerations Arising in Writing a Buddhist Musical (Draft 9.91)*

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*Dedication*

*May this act of creation serve to relieve sentient beings from sorrow.*

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Abstract

In this paper I will attempt to demonstrate that Buddhist teachings are uniquely adaptable to the admittedly unlikely artistic genre of the Broadway style musical--this, in spite of a number of challenges associated with any such venture. I will show how two specific kinds of concern, the ethical and the artistic, were overcome through the self-conscious employment of Buddhist principles throughout the script-writing process. The ethical concerns were centred upon the questions of wholesome intention and cultural misrepresentation. The artistic challenge pertained to the goal of writing a play that would simultaneously appeal to three distinct target audiences: the North American public, scholars of Buddhist Studies, and members of various western sanghas. I will attempt to show how these issues were addressed by reconceiving the writing process so as to be guided by Buddhist pedagogical principles, including right speech (*samyag-vāc*), and skill in means (*upāya*). A deliberate repositioning of authorial standpoint, from one of imagined objectivity towards one of non-dual embodiment, allowed for the development of a script that simultaneously examines and exemplifies Buddhism in action.

*Section 1: A Buddhist musical?*

*What The Buddha Never Taught* is an adaptation of a popular travelogue by Tim Ward, first published some thirty years ago.<sup>1</sup> The book is an autobiographical account of a young Canadian philosophy student seeking enlightenment at an international monastery in N.W. Thailand. The story, such as it is, concerns the spiritual ups and downs of the author, as he and an American friend, Jim, take their first awkward steps upon the Buddhist path. Much of Ward's book is critical of the inconsistencies he found to exist within the Thai wat where he stayed. In general, those difficulties lay with the institutionalized religion and regimental mindset he witnessed among the westerners staying at the wat, rather than with the Buddha's teachings themselves. Upon publication the book met with mixed reviews. The most serious criticisms were ethical in nature and concerned the motivations of the author. Was he not overly rash in his judgement? Had he ever, in fact, been serious about learning the Buddha's way? Didn't he have a book in

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<sup>1</sup> Its title, of course, is a play on that of Walpola Rahula's wonderful introduction to Buddhism, *What the Buddha Taught*.

mind all along? Was he guilty of exploiting the generosity and openness of his hosts? What was his real motivation?<sup>2</sup>

## *Section 2: Ethical Considerations*

There is a rather long and convoluted story concerning how it came to pass that in 2016 I found myself writing a stage-play adaptation of Tim Ward's book. Needless to say, the initial idea of undertaking the project was fraught with doubt and uncertainty. Aside from my complete lack of experience as a playwright, I was acutely aware of the criticisms that had been leveled at the book. It was therefore essential that I raise the same ethical questions for myself: What was my *own* motivation? Wasn't there something inherently disrespectful about the idea of setting a musical in a monastery? What could possibly serve as an academic rationale for such a project? It took me two years to answer these questions to my own satisfaction. In the end I concluded that my motivations were no less wholesome than any those of any other academic project. Moreover, in so far as they involved developing my capacities as a playwright and songwriter they were also highly personal. I sensed an unusually *creative* opportunity to explore a very topical area of Buddhist Studies, namely, the adoption of Buddhism in the west. It was precisely my background as an academic that would enable me to do this, and do it right. Only a person in my position would know where and how to draw the line when it came to representing Buddhism on stage. Better me than someone else less familiar with the territory.<sup>3</sup>

The possibilities presented by the project were compelling. It offered a rare opportunity to bring an artistic representation of Buddhist teachings before a very wide audience, one that I identified as being roughly divisible into three: a public with no background in Buddhism, colleagues in the academic world, and finally the various communities of western Buddhist practitioners. Done well, the play would offer the public a well-informed, entertaining, and respectful treatment of its subject matter: the western encounter with Buddhism. At a minimum, if successful, the play would challenge cultural assumptions and serve as a broad invitation to self-reflection and self-questioning. Inevitably, for some audience members, it would open the door to the possibility that the Buddha's teachings might have something to offer—although this could not be its goal. For academics, the project represented a fascinatingly original prospect, namely, that of seeing Buddhist philosophical concepts examined on stage – a novel idea if ever there was one.<sup>4</sup> And for members of western sanghas, I would aim to write a play in whose events they would be able to recognize some of their own experiences in making Buddhism their own.

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<sup>2</sup> In spite of the mixed reviews, the book went on to become a minor classic of the travel literature genre and actually ended up serving to positively publicize the wat in question, attracting many new practitioners to Buddhism. See Ward 2010 "Preface," xv-xx.

<sup>3</sup> There would be no singing or dancing Thai monks on stage! Such integral elements of the Broadway musical genre would be confined to the western characters upon which the play is centred.

<sup>4</sup> Among the ideas I wished to treat were those of conditioned genesis, nirvana, emptiness, and karma.

### Section 3: Artistic Considerations

From the outset, then, the script was conceived of as aiming at three different target audiences. The initial artistic challenge would be to strike the right balance in addressing them. The question became, how could the play speak to one audience without either boring or alienating the others? If, for example, the play was written from too much of a Buddhist insider's perspective, it ran the risk of being perceived as a "religious play," which would immediately alienate much of the secularly-minded general public--not to mention the academic world, with its default stance of arms-length objectivity.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, if the script was not sufficiently detailed and informative about Buddhism, it likely would be of little interest to academics and Buddhist practitioners. Finally, if the play was overly intellectual and "objective" in tone it ran the risk of being hopelessly boring to anyone *but* an academic! In point of fact, this proved to be the most difficult initial stumbling block. Early drafts of the play were so heavily tilted towards an academic audience as to be stultifyingly dull. Filled with long heady passages of philosophical dialogue and debate on topics ranging from the reality of rebirth to the nature of emptiness, initial versions of the script just didn't work *as theatre*.

It was apparent that the writing process was demanding an overhaul, a fundamental reconceptualization. The play lacked spirit. The approach was wrong, somehow. Continuing my research into the history and nature of the dramatic arts, I began to realize where the problem lay. In writing a piece of theatre I needed to learn how to represent ideas and sensibilities not through dialogue and argument, but through their portrayal *in action*. Action, karma. The nature of karma had already been identified as one of central themes for the play. I dug deeper. As it turns out, the very word "drama" *also* means action, derived for the Greek verb *dran*--to do, to act, to perform. This serendipitous coincidence of meanings provided just the clue required. To write a play centered on Buddhism, the goal could be nothing other than to engage in *kuśala*-drama.<sup>6</sup> Dharmic drama. To enact this goal, the writer himself would need to be reimagined as writing in

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<sup>5</sup> In this connection one might contrast two well-known musicals from the 1970s: Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1970) and John Michael Tebelak's *Godspell* (1971)--both works based on the *Gospel of Matthew*. The latter adopts a more explicitly faith-based perspective than the former. The enduring success of the former arguably lies in its deliberate appeal to secular audiences (not to mention its unsurpassed musical score). It is probably safe to say that this *Jesus Christ Superstar* has done even more to inform the general public of Christian teachings than Gideon's Bible. It is still touring fifty years after its premiere.

<sup>6</sup> In this context it can be noted that the possibility of dramatic action being *kuśala* fits very neatly with the scholarship on this basic moral term. An action is *kuśala* in the sense of being wholesome *and* skilful (which are the two most common translations of the word). This reveals a fascinating dual aspect to the concept of *kuśala-karma*, which embodies the wise, healthy qualities of the mental states that form its basis while simultaneously pointing beyond itself to a transcendent goal (i.e. Awakening or nirvana). Arguably, good theatre does the same thing, lifting the cast and audience to a level of comprehension beyond that of the skilful performances being enacted on stage. For a discussion of *kuśala* as nirvanic, see Keown 1995. Also see: Adam 2005, 2008; Cousins 1996, and Premasiri 1987.

such a way as to allow Buddhist concepts and themes *to be demonstrated* rather than stated. The authorial standpoint needed to shift from one of imagined commentarial objectivity towards one of non-dual embodiment of Buddhist principles. In this way, the project's rationale could be redefined: the goal would be to write a *Buddhist play*, not simply a play *about* Buddhism. The play would aim to serve as a living example of Buddhist pedagogical principles in action. At the same time, however, the concern over writing from an insider's perspective remained; a certain critical distance had to be maintained. The key would be to strike the right balance, to find a middle way.<sup>7</sup>

Aside from the obvious sense in which the balancing of three intended audiences can be understood as an attempt to practice skill in means *as a writer*, from an academic perspective the very choice of a Broadway style *musical* as an artistic genre for the project could now be consciously rationalized as serving as an instance of skillful means (*upāya-kauśalya*). Of all art-forms, the Broadway style musical is among the most culturally distinctive and appealing to western audiences. It is also, potentially, among the most crass and superficial of genres, and therefore, arguably, the most antithetical to Buddhist sensibilities. Yet the choice of a medium so foreign to Buddhism as traditionally understood is arguably consistent with Buddhism's anti-essentialist stance (*niḥsvabhāvatā*), a stance that opens the door to different possible modes of artistic expression depending on the intended audience. As a piece of Buddhist musical theatre aimed at western audiences, *What the Buddha Never Taught: A Rock Opera* was written with the intent of embodying this remarkable capacity and, in so doing, elevating the level of public discourse about Buddhism in the west. As such, the play aims to serve as a Buddhist exemplification of McLuhan's famous insight that the medium is the message. In this case, the message is that of a generalized cultural effect: what Thomas Tweed has referred to as the ongoing Buddhification of American society.

Buddhification refers to the complex transcultural process whereby a confluence of forces that originated in the late nineteenth century and intensified between the 1940s and the 1960s allowed some decontextualized Buddhist beliefs, practices, and artifacts to circulate widely, especially among Americans who did not identify with that tradition. (Tweed 2013: 194)

With the two small caveats that we were here a) including Canada and b) aiming for an *accurate and properly contextualized account* of the issues faced by westerners in their encounter with Buddhism, Tweed's description works well. *What the Buddha Never Taught: A Rock Opera* is intended as both a portrayal of the kind of pop Buddhist phenomena that first emerged in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, as well as a living example of the very phenomenon it attempts to place in the spotlight: the encounter between Buddhism and the west.

#### *Section 4: Embodying the Buddha's Teachings on Stage*

To be a *Buddhist* play, then, the script would have to embody Buddhist principles. Minimally these would need to include the basic moral principles of the tradition; as a written work it would

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<sup>7</sup> In the last analysis, this must remain the main criterion by which the success or failure of the production should be judged.

have to be guided by considerations of right speech (*samyag-vāc*). Most importantly, it would have to be honest and aim to do no harm. For this reason, it was decided early on that the play should focus on the western experience of Buddhism rather than any living Asian Buddhist tradition. This consideration is critically important. The motivation for this decision can be understood as having two related aspects, both of which can be characterized as right speech considerations. Principally it has to do with avoiding inadvertent offence and possible hurt feelings, as occurred upon the publication of Ward's book. The second concern pertained to possible charges of cultural misrepresentation. Who was this present writer, as a westerner, to speak for traditions other than his own? The easiest way to avoid such problems would be to keep representations of identifiable Asian Buddhist traditions to an absolute minimum. The play would be centered on the experience of western Buddhists alone. In the end, considerations of right speech would mean a thorough overhaul of the original book, one that eliminated all references to Thai Buddhist lineages, teachers, and traditions.

Reimagining the book would also mean the introduction of a dramatic plot that could deliver on key Buddhist themes. The upshot of Ward's book can be characterized as one of critical appreciation of the Buddha's teachings, with certain strong reservations about the adoption of those teachings among westerners. The message of the play, however, is more optimistic on the this score, holding forth the idea that Buddhism can meet the spiritual needs of westerners in an authentic way, precisely because of its remarkable capacity to adapt itself to foreign worldviews and new cultural environments. To deliver on this message, the script would require a compelling, positively focussed narrative capable of delivering on key Buddhist themes such as karma and the middle way--an aim shared individually by each of the musical's twenty-two Buddhist pop songs.<sup>8</sup> This point can be illustrated with reference to *The Secret*, a philosophical-musical repartee sung by the two main characters of the play, Tim and Jim.

To set the song in context, it can be noted that Tim and Jim form a natural dyad, their complimentary personalities readily lending themselves to creative reinterpretation along Buddhist lines. Arriving at the monastery at the same time, the two young men quickly form an unlikely friendship. In terms of character, Tim is the perpetual optimist, always looking on the bright side of life; he is sincerely interested in learning the Buddha's way. Jim is a skeptic, a cynic from the start. The Buddha's teachings?--well, that was so long ago, who can really say what he actually taught? Besides, what possible relevance could they have for today, anyway?

Throughout the play, the two characters are developed in such a way as to illustrate specific Buddhist philosophical themes. They are like two sides of the same coin. Tim is a classical free-will advocate, Jim a determinist.<sup>9</sup> Tim represents an eternalist position (*śāśvatavāda*), a position

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<sup>8</sup> The following are among the Buddhist themes and issues touched upon in the individual songs: the five precepts, three kinds of action (mental, physical, and vocal), the meeting of east and west, interpreting the Vinaya rules in a contemporary context, the middle way, belief in non-human spiritual beings, no self, impermanence, the transformative power of compassion, and what the Buddha taught and did not teach.

<sup>9</sup> For a recent attempt to map a Buddhist understanding on to this western philosophical dilemma see Adam 2016.

that ultimately grounds his hope for the future. Jim represents annihilationism (*ucchedavāda*), a position that leads him to despair. In the moments before the song Jim admits to Tim that he has twice attempted suicide. At the end of the song a Buddhist monk, Yenaviro, enters centre-stage, offering an alternative vision to the extreme views represented by Tim and Jim.

*The Secret*

TIM

I've got a secret I'd rather not say  
I can't quite believe it--but it's true that I...  
Well, you've probably guessed it-- 'round here it's taboo  
It's my little secret--but I'll share it with you...  
    I believe in God (3 X)  
    somehow...

JIM

Well, I've got a secret--the truth can be hard  
But we have to be fearless and speak honest words  
I'd rather not keep it--it's so hard to bear  
I'll just have to speak it--but you'd better beware...  
    Life's absurd (3 X)  
    It all just ends one day

TIM and JIM

I believe in God / Life's absurd...(3 X)

YENAVIRO

There is a secret, no words can say  
Look deep through this sorrow and listen, and pray  
The answer will come to you, as a shape-shifting cloud  
a floating soap-bubble, an imagined sky-flower...  
And when you see clearly and drop all your views  
You'll walk down the middle of eternal truths.<sup>10</sup>

The appearance of Yenaviro on stage is a rare one. Though his role is minimal, it is essential. His inclusion serves to provide a contrast to the extreme understandings and confused behaviors of the western characters struggling to find a foothold on the path.<sup>11</sup> His actions are meant to speak

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<sup>10</sup> The album is available on all the main digital music platforms, including Spotify and Apple Music. Track 13, *The Secret*, can also be found here:

<https://www.whatthebuddhanevertaughtmusical.com/samples>

<sup>11</sup> Originally conceived as a Nepali, by the time of the play's production Yenaviro had become a monk "of no fixed address," a bit of a mystery to the western novices who populate the stage. He is, by and large, an elusive figure, welcoming Tim upon his arrival at the wat and seeing him off upon his somewhat ignominious departure. His lines are few, and are spoken not sung. On two occasions he recites verses from the *Dhammapada*, including, at the very end of the play, verse

for themselves: compassionate, wise, spontaneously helpful. They have an effect. In a scene following shortly after *The Secret*, having heard Yenaviro's words, Jim undergoes a very powerful realization while meditating, one that transforms his self-understanding and softens his harsh attitude. In the end, he decides to stay on at the monastery. Through the example of Jim's character development and personal transformation, a number of distinctive Buddhist themes are illustrated, notably those of the middle way, the power of practice, the unfathomability of karma, and compassion. In this way, it can be seen how the adoption of the artistic genre of *the musical* as a novel mode of artistic expression is entirely consistent with spirit of the Buddha's dharma. *What the Buddha Never Taught: A Rock Opera* aims to open the door to the possibility of Awakening.

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183: Not to do any evil, to develop what is good, purification of the mind—This is the teaching of the Buddhas.

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