



www.dhammadstream.org

Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammasambuddhasa

Published by

Buddhist Discussion Centre Australia.

A.C.N. 005 701 806 A.B.N. 42 611 496 488

33 Brooking Street, Upwey, Victoria 3158, Australia

Email: wbu@bdcu.org.au

Website: www.bdcu.org.au

Associated Institution of the World Buddhist University
World Fellowship of Buddhists Regional Centre

Copyright - Buddhist Discussion Centre (Upwey) Ltd

May You Be Well And Happy

Summary

This article discusses many aspects of how chanting is used in Buddhism as an important practice to awaken our mind, rather than as habitual ritual which does not lead to awakening.

The Benefits of Chanting

According to the Oxford English Dictionary the word '**chant**' is both a noun and a verb, also (now Scottish) chaunt, compared with the late 17th Century, old and modern French verb, 'with chant' which is derived from the Latin, 'cantum'.

The word 'chant' is defined as:

- 1.' a song; singing' from the late 17th Century,
2. 'in Music, a short musical passage in two or more phrases each with a reciting note to which any number of syllables may be sung for singing unmetrical words; a psalm, canticle, etc. so sung' in the late 18th century.
3. 'a measured monotonous song, a musical recitation of words; a singsong intonation in talk' from the 19th Century

This history of chanting extends beyond the time of the known origin of the word which is listed in the Oxford and Etymological Dictionaries.

In the Oxford Companion to music on the subject of Church music Scholes states that:

'It must be remembered that there are in the musical exercises of religion other purposes than the helping of the worshipper to experience those moments of mystical communion or of making an 'offering'. In music lies the one effective means of communal expression. The largest bodies of worshippers may join in expressing their faith, their hope, or their charity in song whose necessary simplicity seems to detract nothing from its emotional strength when it is sung with unanimity and fervour. The duty here imposed upon those charged with the ordering of music in the service of religion is the provision of a large and varied body of religious poetry and accompanying music, dignified yet simple.'

Some persons support the use of bad music to lead men into good ways, since usually they are, from some natural incapacity, or through lack of early musical environment, incapable of feeling the difference between good and bad in music, and sometimes, even of realizing that 'bad' exists. There is good and bad in everything else, so it is reasonable to suppose that there is good and bad in music.

This is the Christian Orthodox view of music.

Association with the 'bad' in any aspect of life has a darkening effect on the mind, whereas association with the 'good' brightens the mind. If two pieces of music, good and bad, have equally strong attractive qualities, the ultimate end in view will be better attained by the use of the good. And 'good' yet highly 'attractive' music does exist and has powerfully aided religious movements from the beginning of Christianity to the present day.

In the meaning of art, the highest form of written expression is calligraphy. Poetry in calligraphy is written in classic arrangements. Diverging from this was frowned upon by the ancients.

As calligraphy is to the eye, so is chanting to the ear.

Therefore, in deference to and in acknowledgment of powerful wisdom of the ancients, we train our minds accordingly. In a Dhamma ending age, there are plentiful examples of chanting that will not give practice fruit.

The Buddha stated that we should not 'sanskritise' the Dhamma, that is, do not to put it into short rhyming stanzas.

So we chant with pauses between the syllables. We do not attempt to flow the syllables into a continuous melody, for if we did, we would be sanskritising like Hindu chanting.

For example, we chant 'na' silent space...'mo' silent space...'tas' silent space...'sa' silent space and so on. We do not chant under any circumstances continuous melody such as opera that is sung with high pitched continuous melody. The ability of the singer, say a soprano, to hold a note without a break is considered to be a virtue in western music. If we chanted like this in the Buddhist world, we would be in error.

When we sing, 'ti voglio bene assai, ma tanto tanto bene assai' in Italian high key, we sing it as 'tiovogliobeneassaimatantotantobeneassai' with no silent space. It becomes a feat of breath control and technique to express this type of expression. The popularity of opera is that there are definite melodies which are easy to copy up to a point by inexperienced singers who when they phase the words run out of breath.

Running short of breath tends to cause tension and aggravation of the mind so it could not be conducive to samatha meditation.

The disturbance of the mind through the aspiration of the breath is a form of excitement because shortage of breath is associated with many emotions such as fear or passion. The aim of Buddha Dhamma chanting is not to arouse fear or passion (raga in Pali).

In essence, there is a totally different approach to the sounding of Pali chanting compared to an operatic aria.

It is true that both forms generate some sort of feeling, but the akusala (unwholesome) fears such as grief, affliction, agony, anguish, woe, remorse, regret, wretchedness, pain, fury, passion, fervour, rapture, misery, tragedy, obsession, madness, despair, treachery, anger, sense of loss, intoxicated sense of love and all the machinery used in the business of opera, emotion generation that makes the breath of the listener to bind up or even cease for a second.

By such tricks on the mind, the attention of the person becomes focused and committed to a fantasy world that has no bearing on reality. The belief in such fictions as generated by the operatic performance causes the audience to become deeply involved in the plot, believing the falsehood of the operatic plot are real. It is this type of performance that was available in Buddha's day that forms the basis of one of the prohibitions of the vinaya (the rules of the monks and nuns). They are prohibited from spending their time viewing live performances.

It is totally logically consistent with this rule that the Buddha did not wish to form a body of performance based on fictional stories being chanted. What we chant is different layers of the description of the truth of states of mind or states of matter or a list of what is the highest blessing or things are useful in everyday life. A fictional story has no place in Buddha repertoire. Performers who chant fiction and use their minds to hypnotize the audiences into their belief system are likely to be born into a laughing hell in their next life. Hypnosis is prohibited as a method in Buddhist teaching systems because it weakens the will of the recipient. In Buddhist practice much emphasis is placed on generating will (in Pali: cetana) to practice each for himself or herself. Although a teacher may encourage a student to practice, the practice must be in accordance with the quiet dignity that is displayed in expounding the principles of the teaching.

In teaching, the Buddha used many stories, but all of them were true. Stories of former lives (jataka tales) were often used to explain cause and effect. It is permissible to chant the Pali Buddhist text word for word and each part has some beneficial use provided it is given at the appropriate time.

The stories chanted are more like catalogue lists of minds that are conducive to the wellbeing of many, or the properties of a matter in an almost scientific catalogue list

Gotama Buddha lived about 2500 years ago when there were no books to preserve the Buddha Dhamma Teachings. The only way to recollect the Teachings was by memory. Chanting forms our oral histories. The regular chanting of the discourses helps to recollect and practice Buddha Dhamma. Chanting, especially if done in the original 'Pali' language is a powerful method to learn Buddha Dhamma and is used by practitioners all over the world.

The famous Chinese monk of the 7th century, I. Tsing, mentioned that chanting has six benefits:

1. It enables us to understand the Buddha's virtues,
2. It teaches prosody,
3. It helps to teach language,
4. It exercises the lungs
5. It exercises the chest, and;
6. It helps one overcome reservedness while in front of others.

All these are good reasons to learn and practice chanting regularly.

When the Sutras are chanted, three great and powerful forces are activated. These are the forces of the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha. Buddhism is the combination of these 'Three Jewels' and when invoked together they can bring great blessings to humankind.

Some persons may think that chanting is an expression of devotion to the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha. Better than devotion would be confidence (Pali: Saddha).

The Qualities of the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha can be chanted in Pali as follows:

ITI PI SO BHAGAVA ARAHAM
SAMMA SAMBUDDHO VIJJA CARANA-SAMPANNO
SUGATO LOKAVIDU ANUTTARO
PURISA DAMMA-SARATHI
SATTHA DEVA-MANUSSANAM
BUDDHO BHAGAVA TI

SVAKKHATO BHAGAVATA DHAMMO
SANDITTHIKO AKALIKO
EHI-PASSIKO OPANAYIKO
PACCATTAM VEDITABBO VINNUHI TI

SUPATIPANNO BHAGAVATO SAVAKA SANGHO
BU PATIPANNO BHAGAVATO SAVAKA SANGHO
NAYA PATIPANNO BHAGAVATO SAVAKA SANGHO
SAMICI PATIPANNO BHAGAVATO SAVAKA SANGHO
YADIDAM CATTARI PURISA YUGANI
ATTA PURISA PUGGALA
ESA BHAGAVATO SAVAKA SANGHO
AHUNEYYO PAHUNEYYO
DAKKHINEYYO ANJALI KARANIYO
ANUTTARAM PUNNAK-KHETTAM LOKASSA TI

The Vandana for Buddha, the salutation to the Buddha is chanted in Pali as:

‘Om Namō Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Samma Sambuddhassa’

It can be translated as:

I pay homage to Him, to the Exalted One, to the Worthy One, to the fully Enlightened One.

There are various English translations used for this Vandana.

The word ‘Namō’ is very powerful. "Na" and "mo" are the names of two of the four elements. At another level of understanding, this is like wielding two of the great elements to cut and subdue problems.

The "Om" in front adds great energy.

If we want to gain benefits from chanting, we have to avoid the hindrances. Chanting is not done as ritual. Chanting is practiced without ritual. While chanting, the mind should be in the present. Chanting helps to develop mindfulness. Chanting is not like singing a tune. It will never reappear. So we must keep the mind in the present.

Because the Lord Buddha is a superior teacher we chant ‘Namō Buddha’ or ‘Namō Buddhaya’. This is why we do not worship but respect. The meaning of the term ‘Namō’ is vast; it means respect, veneration, gratefulness and honor, to mention just some of the meanings. You should find the meaning in your own mind. You then place 100 per cent sincerity on the meaning you find in your own mind. You will then create good causes to have the Teaching of the Buddha come to you fast.

The Buddhist practitioner does not worship the Buddha, does not ask for worldly favors, but respects the Buddha for His Supreme achievement. The Venerable Dr. K. Sri Dhammananda Mahathero (1999) says in his book *What Buddhists Believe*: “When Buddhists respect the Buddha, they are indirectly elevating their own minds so that one day they also can get the same enlightenment to serve mankind (sic) if they aspire to become a Buddha.”

Chanting is a means of recalling the great virtues of the Lord Buddha, whose virtues and good qualities are inspiring and a guidance to develop the confidence to follow His Teachings.

Chanting can help to clear the mind.

When we chant, we know the impermanence of the formation and arising of the sound. The mind has the potential to know the elements and meaning of language, and when it brightens it is saying the highest form of knowledge - the truth of what is what. Chanting cleans and quietens the mind. As the mind becomes clearer and quieter it also becomes brighter.

The three characteristics of existence are:

ANICCA - impermanence

DUKKHA - sorrow, suffering, unsatisfactoriness

ANATTA - no-self, emptiness

As applied to the five groups making up body-mind, there are:

RUPAM - form, body

VEDANA - feeling, sensation in the body

SANNA - sense of existence of any kind, perception, memory

SANKHARA - all kinds of thoughts, moral and immoral

VINNANAM - consciousness as thinking, knowing with intention.

The Five Groups and their characteristics are chanted in Pali as:

RUPAM ANICCAM DUKKHAM ANATTA

RUPAM ANICCAM DUKKHAM ANATTA

RUPAM ANICCAM DUKKHAM ANATTA

VEDANA ANICCA DUKKHA ANATTA

VEDANA ANICCA DUKKHA ANATTA

VEDANA ANICCA DUKKHA ANATTA

SANNA ANICCA DUKKHA ANATTA

SANNA ANICCA DUKKHA ANATTA

SANNA ANICCA DUKKHA ANATTA

SANKHARA ANICCA DUKKHAM ANATTA

SANKHARA ANICCA DUKKHAM ANATTA

SANKHARA ANICCA DUKKHAM ANATTA

VINNANAM ANICCAM DUKKHAM ANATTA

VINNANAM ANICCAM DUKKHAM ANATTA

VINNANAM ANICCAM DUKKHAM ANATTA

The Tibetan mantra 'Om Mani Padme Hum' is the mantra of one of the Bodhisattva attendants of Amithaba. Unlike Metta (loving kindness) Karuna (compassion) is limited. It is better to chant on a component of Metta (loving kindness) than on a component of compassion.

The teachings explain that each of the six syllables of the mantra has a specific and potent effect in bringing about transformation at different levels of our being over a world cycle or two. In one human rebirth, there is not enough time available for the six syllables to purify completely the six poisonous negative emotions, which are the manifestation of ignorance, and which causes us to act negatively with our body, speech and mind, creating samsara and our suffering in it. But repeated use of this chant may give us a rebirth in a Pure land.

There are many reasons why it is beneficial to chant. We do not only chant for ourselves. By chanting the Metta Sutta, for example, we send loving kindness to other beings: that they may be free from hatred, be free from hurting others, be free from harming others, be trouble free in body in mind and that they may preserve their own happiness. Also, the merits made by chanting can be shared with many other beings.

The mindful direction of the merits can help numerous beings to get to know the path, realize the path and follow the path of Buddha Dhamma provided you radiate Metta in 10 directions evenly. But unfortunately it requires a lot of practice to achieve equanimity towards the 10 directions. So practice. Chanting if done correctly is a way of making higher merit and blesses many beings. It can wash away negativities that obscure our mind from understanding the Four Noble Truths.

Paritta Chanting is the recital of the Suttas for the blessing and protection of the devotees. It is usually done in the Pali language as uttered by the Buddha. These Suttas were originally written down on *ola* leaves about two and a half thousand years ago.

Chanting a protective Sutta shields ourselves “from various forms of evil spirits, misfortune, sickness and influence of the planetary systems as well as instilling confidence in the mind” (Dhamananda Mahathero 1999). The vibrant sound of chanting creates a pleasing atmosphere to the beings within mind range.

Also of importance is the rhythm. For example, monks adopt different intonations to harmonise with different Suttas. Significant psychological states of peacefulness and serenity in the mind of listeners can be produced by certain rhythms of the human voice. Certain intonation levels appeal to devas, and certain rhythms can create a good influence over lower beings like animals.

The correct rhythm is an important aspect in chanting. In all religions the practitioners follow certain rhythms when reciting texts from the holy books, such as the Quran rendition by Muslims, the Veda Mantra Chanting by Hindu priests in the Sanskrit language, and chanting by certain Christian groups, especially the Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox sects.

The chanting or listening to the Buddhist Suttas activates the three great and powerful forces of the Buddha, Dhamma and the Sangha. Chanting can help to reduce sickness and other mental disturbances. Chanting also helps to hold the precept of ‘no lying’. Dr. K. Sri Mahathero (1999) writes that “the power of Truth has become a source of strength in the words uttered by the Buddha with great compassion. However, the power of the Buddha’s word alone is not enough to secure blessing without the devotion and understanding of the devotees”.

May you be well and happy and practice the correct form of chanting for you this life.

This article was written for radio broadcast by the Buddhist Hour Radio Team. December 2000

References

Ariyesako, Bhikkhu, 1995, *A Lay Guide to the Bhikkhu's Rules*. Sogyal Rinpoche, Introduction by Ven. Bhikkhu Sanghasena. Mahabodhi international Meditation Centre.

Bourke, P., and Butler L., *International Links in Higher Education Research - Commissioned Report No. 37*, May 1995, National Board of Employment, Education and Training, AGPS, Canberra ISBN 0 644 45183 1

Dhammananda, Dr. K. Sri, 1999, *What Buddhists Believe*, Yayasan Belia Buddhist Malaysia. ISBN 983 40070 1 9

The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, 1993, New York: Oxford University Press.

Partridge, E., 1966, *A short Etymological Dictionary of Modern English Origins*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Wat Ananda Metyarama, *Buddhist Chanting*, Singapore, The Buddhist Heritage.

The Oxford Companion to Music, Scholes, Tenth Edition, Oxford University Press.