

梵唄
*Chinese
Buddhist
Monastic
Chants*

Edited by
PI-YEN CHEN



For my parents and teachers

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Chapter 2

Categorization and Analysis of Musical Styles

It is important to recognize that Chinese Buddhist chants are liturgical, and their musical forms are determined by the various text types and their functions within the liturgical proceedings. Conventionally, chant forms are defined as praises, *gāthās*, *sūtras*, *dhāraṇīs*, prayers, and so forth, but these terms describe literary rather than musical structures. *Sūtras* and *dhāraṇīs* have very different literary structures and meanings, for example, but their recitation styles may sound the same. Furthermore, *dhāraṇīs* can be chanted or recited in different melodic or rhythmic forms, depending on the liturgical context. In order to enable a more precise discussion of the musical forms of Chinese Buddhist chants, this chapter provides a new categorization based on musical attributes and ritual purposes. This system does not discard the conventional definitions, but rather supplements them in order to highlight musical and liturgical features. Based on this new criteria, Chinese Buddhist chants divide into the following categories (1) free chant (with both even and complex beats), (2) prayer, (3) *dhāraṇī* based on a precomposed melody, (4) praises, (5) *gāthās*, (6) solo chant, (7) invocation of the Buddha, (8) *baiyuan* (antiphonal invocation), and (9) *baiwen* (liturgical recitative). Certain categories divide further into subsets, which are outlined following the discussion of the main category.

Free Chant

Free chant is used for reciting the most sacred scriptures (*sūtras* and some *dhāraṇīs*), which are found in the main text of the daily service. In free chant, there is no pre-composed melody to guide the chanters; instead, they create new melodies in every performance and even at every moment. CD track 1, a spontaneous performance by three nuns from Xiang Guang Buddhist Temple in Taiwan, illustrates the process of free chant in Chinese Buddhism; three different melodic lines are clearly audible, each chanted by one of the three performers. There are two basic styles of free chant: recitation with an even beat, and recitation with a complex beat.

Recitation with an Even Beat

The texts of the morning service are largely recited using free chant with an even beat. The Śūraṅgama Dhāraṇī, the

first liturgical item of the morning service, is an excellent example of this style. (Its opening *gāthā*—the vowing *gāthā* of Ānanda—is also used in other liturgical contexts with different musical styles; see “Solo Chant” below for a translation of this text and a discussion of a contrasting musical setting, and CD track 1 for a recording.) There are no complex rhythmic patterns in this style of chanting. The wooden fish simply sounds on each beat, thereby controlling the speed of recitation. The wooden fish is ideal for this purpose, for although its low tone sounds mild and restrained, its large size ensures that the voices of the congregation never overwhelm it, even in large temples. The recitation begins with a very slow tempo and gradually accelerates until the chanting reaches and sustains an extremely fast speed. Indeed, most of the main text is chanted at the highest speed, and it is not until the last three words that the tempo suddenly slows down to conclude the cadence. The brisk tempo gives the impression of a highly spontaneous interpretation that directly responds to the text and acoustics. It also serves to help the chanters maintain their concentration as they recite the long and difficult text. The free manner of recitation, rhythmic participation of instruments, and fast tempo all contribute significantly to the ritual effect and religious purpose.

CD track 2 presents the entire main text of the morning service, including the Śūraṅgama Dhāraṇī, the Great Compassionate Dhāraṇī, the Ten Short Dhāraṇīs, and the Heart Sūtra. It was recorded during the morning service celebrated by the *saṅgha* of Xiang Guang Buddhist Temple. The recording illustrates the characteristic acceleration during the recitation of the Śūraṅgama Dhāraṇī, and it also highlights the improvisational and unpredictable nature of the free-chant style. At the beginning, following the chant leader’s intonation, the congregation joins together on the same tone. Very quickly, however, individual chanters diverge with their own tunes. The musical texture becomes a sonic ocean, with dynamic movements of waves that rise and fall without rules, with no way to identify the beginnings of phrases or predict the endings.

As the *saṅgha* chant the Śūraṅgama Dhāraṇī or other texts in a free-chant style, they strive to achieve coherence and continuity in their recitations. Following the tempo set by the wooden fish, they utter the memorized lines

flowingly and ceaselessly until the entire text is complete. They are expected to concentrate wholeheartedly and seamlessly on one single intent, like water pouring down to a fixed point. They practice this concentration by listening to their voices, taking note of each distinct sound and word. By focusing on the sharpest faculty—hearing—the *saṅgha* keep other faculties from straying or becoming sluggish, making it possible to attain single-minded concentration that excludes delusions and distractions.

Recitation with a Complex Beat

The texts of the evening service, which are typically made up of a series of subsections, are commonly recited using free chant with a complex beat. The Text of Worshipping the Buddhas and Penance, named for the 108 acts of worship it advocates, serves as an illustration. The text falls structurally into four parts: (1) praising the merit of the Buddhas' minds and bodies, (2) seeking refuge in the Buddhist three treasures and generating the Mahāyāna Buddhist aspiration, (3) penance, and (4) transferring merits for accomplishing Buddhahood. CD track 3 is the recitation of this selection by the *saṅgha* of Xiang Guang Buddhist Temple; figures 16–18 show the original notation. The free chant in this performance is audibly different from that of track 2 in a number of ways. Perhaps most noticeably, the tempo remains moderate and relatively stable rather than accelerating. In addition, the underlying rhythmic accompaniment is distinctly different and involves a combination of instrumental elements: besides the wooden fish that controls the tempo, the bell drum (with the bell and drum portions each contributing to the pattern) creates a complex rhythmic pattern and distinguishes sections, phrases, and names of the Buddhas; and the large chime indicates the beginning of every subsection.

The bell pattern in particular changes throughout the chant, giving each section a distinct rhythmic identity. Each pattern is generated by the lyrical structure. In the opening *gāthā*, for example, which has seven characters (syllables) in each phrase, the bell sounds with each odd character. Between each stroke of the bell there are two beats (or two strokes of the wooden fish), including the span between the seventh character and the first of the next line. After the opening *gāthā* the pattern shifts, and the bell begins to sound on the second beat, an upbeat, and on subsequent even beats, creating a syncopated rhythm. In section 2 the bell demarcates each worship phrase by sounding on the last character in a line, which lasts for two beats as a cadence. Thus, even if the last syllable is an upbeat (i.e., an even character), the character itself becomes the downbeat in its own unit (the two-beat cadence).

The final section—transferring merits for accomplishing Buddhahood (with text taken from Samantabhadra Bodhisattva's vowing *gāthā*)—features the most complex rhythmic pattern of the entire chant. Structurally, the text is similar to that of the first section: it contains phrases of equal length, with seven characters in each phrase. The roles of the instruments, however, are very different. The bell sounds only on the third and seventh characters, and the drum, taking on a more significant role than in earlier

Figure 16. Selected text and instrumental notation from Text of Worshipping the Buddhas and Penance, first section (Praising the Merit of the Buddhas' Minds and Bodies) and beginning of the second section (Seeking Refuge in the Buddhist Three Treasures). Printed in *Chanmen risong* (Changzhou: Tianning Monastery, 1900; repr., Taipei: Xinwenheng Press, 1988).

sections, enriches the rhythmic complex. In this *gāthā*, the basic rhythmic unit is made up of one sentence (or two phrases); the drum plays during the second phrase in each unit on the first, fourth, and sixth beats. The fourth beat is emphasized by a forceful and loud drum stroke, creating a syncopated pattern that is reinforced by another stroke on the sixth beat. The drum pattern creates a lively mood at the moment when all merits are accomplished and transferred. Throughout this section, the tempo accelerates slightly until it reaches the last sentence, at which point it slows down in transition to the concluding segment—the triple invocation of the Mahāyāna Great Virtue Samantabhadra Bodhisattva. The drum pattern shifts during the transitional passage, sounding on each odd syllable. It maintains the new pattern for the remainder of the recitation.

The rhythmic patterns in this style of free chant emphasize the endings of each phrase more than the beginnings, and the ending of one phrase is what determines the beginning of the next. This is especially true when the length of the phrase is irregular. The section on worshipping the Buddhas, which is recited collectively by the *saṅgha*, is a good illustration of this feature. Each Buddha's name, translated or transliterated from Sanskrit, has a different number of syllables, and the chanters

Transcription 2.1. Zhunti Dhāraṇi

4

Voice

稽 首 皈 依 蘇 悉

Wooden Fish
Cymbal

Bell
Drum

4

帝 頭 面 頂 禮

7

七 俱 胝 我 今

10

稱 讚 大 準 提