



Grieving for the Buddha: Three Cambodian Songs

by Trent Walker

*These three poems, translated from Khmer, are drawn from Trent Walker's forthcoming book, *Until Nirvana's Time: Buddhist Songs from Cambodia* (Shambhala Publications, Autumn 2022). Trent Walker, the Ho Center for Buddhist Studies Postdoctoral Fellow at Stanford University, will join with Chenxing Han (author of *Be the Refuge: Raising the Voices of Asian American Buddhists* and a forthcoming memoir, both published by North Atlantic Books), to lead a retreat on February 18–21, 2022 at the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies. The four-day program, "Story and Song: Learning and Living with Buddhist Chant," centers the texts and melodies of the Cambodian Dharma song tradition as tools for engaging Buddhist narratives and teachings*

1. The Buddha's Last Words

YO VO Ananda!
Come here now; don't delay.
I'll soon pass away,
leaving you all alone.

These were first lines I learned from Prum Ut, my root teacher in the Cambodian Dharma song tradition. I met him as a teenager in Cambodia in 2005 through the auspices of Cambodian Living Arts (CLA), an education and advocacy

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organization based in Phnom Penh. CLA supported Prum Ut and other masters of traditional performing arts by sponsoring classes for young students across the country. After I completed several months of intensive language study in Cambodia's bustling capital, Prum Ut invited me to live in his home in rural Kampong Speu, where a chorus of frogs in nearby paddy fields lulled me to sleep every night.

By day, I studied with Prum Ut, traveling by bicycle to a neighboring village where he taught an afternoon chanting class for local high-school students a few years younger than me. The first song we learned was an anonymous Khmer poem from the eighteenth or nineteenth century, "The Buddha's Last Words" (*pacchimabuddhavacana*). Prum Ut had us recite each line in turn, correcting our technique, intonation, and pronunciation along the way.

At first, I could barely understand the words. The initial stanza was just a string of sounds to me: *yo vo ānand öy / nè pā röy mak āy r"ā / tathāgat niṅ marañā / cāk col pā min khān löy*. Having studied Buddhist teachings for a few years, I gathered that *tathāgat* was the Tathāgata, the Buddha; that *ānand* was Ānanda, the Buddha's cousin and personal attendant; and that *marañā* was related to *marañānussati*, or the contemplation on death. But my comprehension didn't go much further.

What did *pā* refer to, I wondered? It was friendly and sounded like *p"ā*, the word my urban Khmer friends called their fathers, but this *pā* was different, sung with an implosive consonant I struggled to form with my lips. Or what about *nè* and *r"ā*? They sounded like gentle commands, yet they weren't part of the dialect spoken in Prum Ut's village.

Gradually I came to the understanding that "The Buddha's Last Words" is an intimate plea to Ānanda, addressed as *pā*, an archaic form of address for younger males, similar to

“son” in some varieties of English. Particles like *nè* and *r"ā* convey both the urgency and closeness of the Buddha’s tone. Pali-derived words such as *ānand*, *tathāgat*, and *maraṇā* ground the poem in the narrative facts of the Buddha’s life; in simple terms, these three words say, “O Ānanda, I, the Tathāgata, will die.”

The last line of the stanza, *cāk col pā min khān lōy*, “leaving you all alone,” or, more literally, “abandoning you without a lapse,” cuts to the heart of the issue: all those we cherish, even our teachers, even the Buddha, are bound to pass away. How should we respond to their death? What should we do in their absence? How can we continue their legacy?

“The Buddha’s Last Words” offers two responses to these questions: one short, one long. The first is simply the opening two words: *yo vo*. I later found out that this Pali phrase references a famous line in the *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta*, uttered by the Buddha before he passes away: *yo vo ānanda mayā dhammo ca vinayo ca desito paññatto so vo mam'accayena satthā* (“Ānanda, the Dharma and Vinaya I have taught and declared to you shall be your Teacher after I am gone”). This line has a long history in the Pali chanting traditions of mainland Southeast Asia, and the author of the Khmer song was clearly aware of its significance as the final testament of the Buddha. By citing the two initial words, the poem evokes both the Pali liturgical performance of the Blessed One’s last teaching as well as the Southeast Asian practice of integrating Pali phrases into vernacular sermons and chants. Indeed, most Cambodians know “The Buddha’s Last Words” not by its literal title of *pacchimabuddhavacana* but simply as *yo vo*. These two words anchor the weight of the Pali scriptures, forming a secure basis for the composition of new Dharma songs in the vernacular.

The second, longer answer is the rest of the Khmer poem, which emphasizes the emotional dimensions of the Buddha’s impending absence:

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O friend, please be well.
Don't suffer needlessly,
for I must leave you.
Don't you grieve, Ānanda!

My five aggregates
will break down and dissolve.
Stay, stay, Ānanda!
Focus on your own life.

These days your body
is brittle as a bowl.
It won't last for long,
bound to break in pieces.

Please, dear Ānanda,
contemplate this deeply.
When I pass away,
you must bear my teaching.

Truly this Dharma
remains with anyone
whose heart is bright and clear,
who follows what I teach.

Now the Realized One
shall end in nirvana.
Time's curse comes cruelly
to crush and cut off life.

From the moment we met, Prum Ut was teaching me and his other students to prepare for death. He presented us with “The Buddha’s Last Words” as a mirror for our lives and a model for how to die. The Buddha reminds Ānanda that his own body is just as fragile as his teacher’s, “bound to break in pieces” (*gaṇ' nīṇ pān vinās dau*) and that no human body, even the Tathāgata’s, can escape the inexorable forces that

“crush and cut off life” (*dandrān mak phtāc' saṅkhār*). Faced with such inevitability, the Buddha only asks that we “contemplate this deeply” (*cūr gne gnān' git oy jrau*) and keep our hearts “bright and clear” (*jrah thlā*, a Khmer rendering of Pali *pasāda*, “clear faith”). The song reflects our own journeys through and beyond grief.

2. The Buddha's Passing Away

I tell of when our Wise Lord
at last entered nirvana
in an old grove of sal trees,
with his students gathered round,

on the fifteenth waxing day
of the month of Visākha,
a snake year, ending in five,
Tuesday morning in bright sun.

Less than four years after we met, Prum Ut developed severe complications from diabetes. By July 2009, his condition had deteriorated to the point where his family and I decided to ask the hospital in Phnom Penh take him back to his home village so that he could die in peace. He arrived early in the day. By mid-morning, a crowd of students and relatives had gathered around his low wooden bed, placed outdoors in the shade of the house. We chanted, prayed, and recited Dharma songs as he took his final breaths.

When I think of my teacher, I often remember that “morning in bright sun,” with all “his students gathered round,” as he lay inches above the sandy soil he swept clean each morning. I marvel at the ways his voice continues to resound in those he trained across Cambodia. And I recall the swells of love and grief that surged in that moment, knowing Prum Ut had left the world surrounded by the people and chants he loved.

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Prum Ut taught me “The Buddha’s Passing Away”
(*parinibbānakathā*) soon after “The Buddha’s Last Words.”
Penned by Jāy M"ai in 1942, this modern Dharma song
narrates a scene not found in other Buddhist texts, to my
knowledge: Ānanda’s encounter with a group of ordinary
laypeople who haven’t been informed that the Blessed One
has just passed into nirvana.

Monks both young and old were there,
grieving for the Worthy One.
Some bawled in grief, head in hands,
mourning the Glorious Victor.

Some recalled his sage advice,
others his daily rounds for alms.
Still more remembered his sermons.
None could but feel deep sorrow.

The forest glade resounded
with peals of thunder all around.
Beige-white blossoms fell like rain,
blessing the Lord of the World.

Meanwhile, his attendant
Ānanda was out for alms.
Men and women from the town
bowed low before him and asked,

“Venerable Ānanda!
The Worthy One, our great Lord,
has not been seen, night or day.
Where has the Lord Buddha gone?”

We are used to seeing you
always walking in his steps.
Today we’ve lost Māra’s foe;
our Teacher has disappeared.”

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Ānanda couldn't bear their grief.
Hearing them ask for the Buddha,
the Lord they'd never see again,
he covered his face with his palms.

“The All-Wise One won't arrive
since he's entered nirvana.
We've lost the Lord, our Master;
that's why you see me alone.

“Such is our miserable fate,
bereft of our beloved Prince.
From this day on till forever
we'll meet only with suffering.”

Prum Ut learned this Khmer-language song from his own teacher in the 1960s, the words carried by a special melody that varies slightly from stanza to stanza. As in other Theravada cultures, Cambodians have long transmitted the Dharma in two languages: in Pali and in their local tongue, Khmer. Outside of Cambodian communities, not many are familiar with Khmer Buddhist literature, as very few such texts have been translated into English or other languages. This gap means that many Buddhists are missing a chance to encounter some of the most vivid, expressive, and original Theravada literature ever composed.

Among the many genres of Buddhist literature in Cambodia, the Dharma song (*thoa bot* or *smot*) genre stands out for its pithy diction and elaborate melodies. These short texts have circulated through both oral and written transmission over the past four centuries. Sung by laypeople and monastics of all genders, these chants draw on the scales and vocal techniques of traditional Khmer music to lift vernacular Buddhist poems into song. Prum Ut's repertoire alone spanned dozens of chants in Pali and Khmer, some as long as 150 stanzas and taking over three hours to perform.

3. Mourning the Buddha's Demise

I bow my head and bend my body,
my palms pressed close in reverent prayer,
my heart devoted, straight as time,
to the Chief Sage, the World's Crown.

While the Virtuous One still lived,
he always preached the sweet Dharma
to teach and train living beings,
both those on earth and high above.

But the Buddha, Self-Arisen,
could never stay with us for long
for he was bound for nirvana:
no more sermons to true our minds.

Disciples of the Lord of Lords
gathered around in great numbers,
mourning our Teacher's demise
on that sad day and evermore.

How lonely, Lord, how deep our grief:
we're shocked, we're stirred, we're turned around!
Your true form shines, resplendent still,
our ark, our anchor for lives to come.

On the full moon of Visākha,
this very day, our dear Master
emerged from Queen Māyā's side,
left the palace to seek out truth,

reached the peak of awakening,
and passed away in nirvana—
these four pivots in our Lord's life
all came to pass on the same date.

After the Buddha's final end,

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his students, moved by their teacher,
prepared a range of offerings
every full moon of Visākha.

This rite lives on to the present.
May all of us gathered here
bow down before the Blessed One
who best embodies our bright faith.

Having honored the Virtuous One,
I humbly vow to be reborn
in time for Maitreya Buddha,
set to awaken in times to come.

May all my solemn, chanted prayers,
never be lost or forgotten!
May I meet the Buddha-to-come
and settle into lasting peace.

Prum Ut's co-teacher in Kampong Speu was Koet Ran, a blind Dharma song master who has led the CLA-sponsored class since her colleague's passing. During many long afternoons spent at her house, watching cows, chickens, and grandchildren come and go, Koet Ran enlightened me about the aesthetic dimensions of Dharma songs, grounded in the Buddhist emotions of *saṃvega* and *pasāda*. She taught me that some songs, like "The Buddha's Last Words" and "The Buddha's Passing Away," are crafted to stir us into a sense of urgency or *saṃvega*, reminding us of the shortness of life and the harsh reality of samsara. Others, she said, are designed to still us into the clarity of *pasāda*, opening our hearts to light and devotion.

A third group of Dharma songs combine elements of *saṃvega* and *pasāda*, such as "Mourning the Buddha's Demise," an anonymous eighteenth- or nineteenth-century poem. In Koet Ran's notebook of Dharma songs, handwritten by her sighted husband, this song is referred to as *sira on* ("I

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bow my head”), following its first line. The remainder of the opening stanza evokes the clear mind of faith: “my heart devoted, straight as time” (*citt smoh camboḥ traṇ*). A constant theme throughout the text is joyful reverence to the Buddha, referred by many different epithets, including “the Chief Sage” (*braḥ munind*), “the World’s Crown” (*bin lokā*), “Self-Arisen” (*braḥ sayambhū*), “Lord of Lords” (*braḥ jā mcās*), and “the Teacher” (*braḥ sāsṭā*). The closing stanzas center the stillness and clarity of *pasāda*, with lines like “the Blessed One / who best embodies our bright faith” and “May I meet the Buddha-to-come / and settle into lasting peace.”

At the same time, the middle stanzas of “Mourning the Buddha’s Demise” emphasize the stirring urgency of *saṃvega*: “How lonely, Lord, how deep our grief: / we’re shocked, we’re stirred, we’re turned around!” (*braḥ guṇ öy sèn vivek / guor saṃveg bek ṇās’ kūv*). The cause for *saṃvega* is not just the Buddha’s passing, but also the other three events that took places on the same full moon of the month of Visākha (celebrated today as Vesak): his birth, his renunciation, and his enlightenment. The narrative arc of the Buddha’s life has the power to shake us to our core.

The three poems presented here offer contrasting angles on the closing chapter of the Buddha’s life. They each point to different modes of grieving the Teacher, different ways of being moved by Buddhist narratives. The first poem makes the Buddha’s final teaching to Ānanda an intimate exchange, the second humanizes Ānanda’s response to the Teacher’s passing away, and the third imagines the establishment of the annual Vesak rite. Each is traditionally sung with a distinct melody, corresponding to their particular moods and meters, with recorded performances by Prum Ut and Koet Ran lasting between ten and twenty minutes per song. The long, drawn-out style of Dharma songs allows us to take in Buddhist teachings and narratives one line at a time. By focusing on the gradual unfolding of each musical phrase, we may be stirred and stilled, moved by love and filled with joy.

The intended aesthetic response to Dharma songs is impossible to recreate on the page, but can be approximated through slowly chanting the poems aloud. The translations provided here are designed to be recited using the traditional Khmer melodies, but you might try reciting them on a single note or with your own melodies. If you'd like to listen to and learn some of the traditional melodies, I encourage you to connect with a local Cambodian Buddhist community or check out the bilingual recordings available at www.stirringandstilling.org.

My teachers, through example as much as explanation, taught me how such chants are meant to be used: as mirrors for our own stories of grief and joy, sorrow and bliss. Cambodian Buddhists perform these and other Dharma songs in their most solemn rituals: for the dying, for the dead, for the consecration of Buddha images. Prum Ut and Koet Ran were insistent that I help share these songs with a global audience, for they knew the messages were universal: to unsettle our attachments, deepen our aspirations, and find our way toward healing and peace.