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Burmese Buddhist Monks, the Seventh Precept, and Cognitive Dissonance

By Heather MacLachlan

Abstract: Burmese Theravada Buddhist monks have varying degrees of involvement with music; this study of 22 monks from across Burma/Myanmar reveals that most of them often listen to recorded music. At the same time the monks acknowledge that Buddhism's Seventh Precept is (or ought to be) a guide for their behavior, agreeing that to be "attached" to music is to violate their monastic rule. They therefore experience cognitive dissonance, and they respond to this dissonance in predictable ways - that is, in ways documented by researchers working with Western populations. They differ, however, in their phenomenological experiences of attachment.

On July 27, 2019, I entered a Buddhist monastery in Dawei, in southern Karen State in Burma/Myanmar.¹ A gracious thirty-year-old monk named U Wazira Myana greeted me. When I explained that I was a teacher (*sayama*) of music from the United States who wished to learn about music at the monastery, U Wazira Myana immediately produced his cell phone. He showed me a few examples of the music videos he had downloaded on his phone, including a Burmese-language pop song and an English-language pop song. Without prompting, and while laughing gently, U Wazira Myana told me that he was doing something wrong by playing these music recordings for me. In fact, he said, he would "confess" his action that very evening.

In this article I recount conversations I had with Burmese Buddhist monks like U Wazira Myana. During two research trips in 2018 and 2019, I traveled around Myanmar visiting monasteries, ultimately interviewing twenty-two monks in seventeen monasteries. These monks

ranged in age from eighteen to eighty-seven. They lived in the largest cities in the country (Yangon and Mandalay), in towns and regional centers, and in small villages. Some resided in large institutions which included not only dozens of monks but also hundreds of novices and school students. Others were part of much smaller monasteries, and one monk was the only person living in his monastery. All of these monks are adherents of Theravada Buddhism, and all of them have committed themselves to following the teaching of the Buddha as understood by the Theravada tradition. This tradition requires monks to obey Buddhism's Eight Precepts, the seventh of which forbids them from listening to music. My conversations with these monks revealed important trends in Burmese monastic life in the twenty-first century and shaped the arguments I make in this article, to wit: Burmese monks have varying degrees of involvement with music, and they articulate different positions about what is the most appropriate music-related behavior for themselves and their peers. Most of them do listen to music, and they are especially supportive of a kind of contemporary recorded music called *dhamma thachin*, which has not been discussed heretofore in the English-language scholarly literature. At the same time, these monks acknowledge that the Seventh Precept is (or ought to be) a guide for their behavior and agree that to be "attached" to music is to violate their monastic rule. They therefore experience cognitive dissonance, and they respond to this dissonance in predictable ways - that is, in ways documented by researchers working with Western populations. They differ, however, in their phenomenological experiences of attachment. This study demonstrates Burmese monks' commonalities with other human groups, and also the diversity within their own ranks. It is a study which ultimately focuses on the monks' humanity, while at the same time taking seriously their commitment to transcendence.

Buddhism, music, and the Seventh Precept in the English-language scholarly literature

Burmese intellectuals, and educated monks especially, are fond of enumerating and reciting lists (Keeler 2017:75); some of the best-known lists of Buddhist wisdom are known in English as the Three Gems, the Four Noble Truths, and the Noble Eightfold Path. Buddhism also proclaims Eight Precepts, or commandments, that are incumbent upon monks and nuns (and novices of both genders) at all times, and upon lay Buddhists who undertake to observe them during Buddhist festivals (Tilakaratne 2012:48-50).² The first five precepts are prohibitions that are common to the Axial religious traditions; these precepts forbid killing, stealing, sexual offenses, lying, and consuming alcohol. The Seventh Precept is “a vow to abstain from seeing dancing; from music, vocal and instrumental; from dramatic shows; and from wearing perfume or finery” (Greene and Wei 2004:1). Pi-Yen Chen, a scholar of Chinese Buddhism, glosses this commandment as: “The *sangha* [the community of monks] should neither sing, dance, or make music, nor watch, listen or attend performances of these activities” (2004:82). Buddhism’s Eight Precepts are supplemented by other behavioral requirements which apply to monks specifically, totalling two hundred and twenty-seven. And there are yet more teachings which make claims upon monks and nuns and upon Buddhist laypeople; as one monk told me, there are “millions” of rules governing behaviors as mundane as one’s posture when sitting (Ashin Aw Ba Tha, interview, May 3, 2018). Given this plethora of rules, most Burmese Buddhists understandably gloss over details; I found repeatedly that lay Buddhists professed ignorance of the Seventh Precept when I mentioned it to them (example, field notes, June 22, 2019). Monks, for their part, all knew immediately to what I referred when I interviewed them about the Seventh Precept.

Since the 1950s, music scholars have been contributing scholarship to what is now an identifiable field of Buddhist music studies. Virtually all of these scholarly contributions include, as I do here, an explanation of the Seventh Precept, and then go on - as I will - to explain

that despite this prohibition, music making is prominent in Buddhist societies. Most of the literature in the field of “Buddhist musicology” has focused on musicking among lay Buddhists in Mahayana Buddhist societies, particularly in China (Greene, Howard, Miller, Nguyen and Hwee-San 2002:135). This makes sense, as Mahayana Buddhism differs sharply from Theravada Buddhism in its acceptance of music making. Mahayana Buddhism is supportive not only of lay Buddhists creating and performing songs with instrumental accompaniment to express Buddhist ideas, but also of monks singing, playing instruments, and even dancing to such music. Scholars report Mahayana monks composing “Buddhist songs” in China (Chen 2004:89-90), playing musical instruments in Vietnam (Nguyen 2002:67), setting up a recording studio in Taiwan (Chen 2004:89), and dancing a ritual dance in Mongolia (Vähi 1992:49). Some of this literature shows an unfortunate tendency to conflate the chanting that all Buddhists monks perform on a daily basis with “music” (e.g. Perris 1986, Nguyen 2002). It is crucial to emphasize that Theravada monks in Myanmar also chant, meaning that they recite ancient Pali texts, but that neither they nor their followers understand this to be music-making (or singing, as an English speaker might say). The “sonic praxis” of Burmese Buddhism has been analyzed by Paul Greene, who focused on the pitch properties of Burmese chant; Greene carefully explained that this was not musical activity (2004:45).

In 2002, in a review article about Buddhist music studies, the authors pointed out that “Buddhist music in Burma remains greatly understudied” - and the situation has not significantly changed since then (Greene, Howard, Miller, Nguyen and Hwee-San 2002:154). A comprehensive description of the Buddhist musical landscape in Myanmar today is beyond the scope of this article. However, in order to understand Burmese monks’ musical lives in context, it is important to provide an outline of Buddhist music making in the country. Currently,

Myanmar's Buddhist music scene most closely resembles what was documented in Sri Lanka - another Theravada Buddhist country - in the 1990s. In Sri Lanka one could hear "rhythmic lyrical chanting" of ancient texts by monks (who sometimes sang along with the laity), as well as the sounds of drums and reed instruments (*horana*)" played at Buddhist ceremonies, and Buddhist "devotional songs" on the radio (Carter 1993:136). Monks in Myanmar do not sing, and they certainly do not sing together with laypeople (and it should be noted that this practice is controversial in Sri Lanka, also) (Carter 1993:142). However, Burmese indigenous instruments belonging to the *hsaing waing* (classical orchestra) are played at *nat bwe*, or spirit possession ceremonies, which are attended by devout Buddhists, and the sounds of drums and the *hne* double-reed instrument are especially prominent during these ceremonies. There is a complete *hsaing waing* orchestra inside a pagoda in Pakokku in central Burma; it is played on Buddhist holidays for worshippers to hear as they move about the pagoda. Similarly, other *hsaing waing* ensembles are hired to perform at orthodox Buddhist ceremonies, such as the *shin-byu* (to celebrate a boy's entry into the novitiate). Most pertinently for this article, the Burmese Buddhist musical canon includes what are called *dhamma thachin* or *dhamma tay* (dharma songs, in English). These *dhamma thachin* are analogous to Sri Lanka's "contemporary Sinhala musical compositions" which "draw on religious themes but are not particularly associated with religious holidays or corporate ritual settings" (Carter 1993:144). Most importantly, *dhamma thachin* are understood by both monks and Burmese laypeople to be music - that is, music as conventionally defined by all Burmese people; there is no slippage in their categorization as sometimes happens with chant. As we shall see, *dhamma thachin* occupy a special place in the musical lives and religious understandings of Burmese monks.

Ethnographic findings: Burmese monks then and now

Scholars have been interested in Burmese monks' adherence to monastic rules for decades. Ethnographic studies of Burmese monks' behaviors dating back to the 1950s point out that monks regularly violate many of the rules that are supposed to strictly govern their conduct (Pfanner 1966:82); for example, monks decline to go on their daily begging rounds, practise astrology and fortune-telling, and attend movies (Spiro 1970:308, 369, 373). Attending movies is a violation of the Seventh Precept, and scholars have documented monks breaking this precept in a variety of ways. One researcher noted that, in 1950, in a small village north of Yangon, dancing and singing took place at the village monastery during the Kathein festival, in the presence of and with the approval of the monks (Brant 1954:40-41). Melford Spiro recounted that in the 1960s, "when the pious owner of a Mandalay cinema announced that he would refuse to sell tickets to monks, a group of them threatened to burn his theater in reprisal" (1970:373). Ward Keeler's 2017 ethnography is especially valuable in this respect. Keeler spent months living in a Mandalay monastery and reported that, behind closed doors, monks ate after noon (2017:58), and handled money (2017:94) and listened to music (2017:67).

My own interest in this topic began with hearing a public sermon preached in downtown Yangon on February 24, 2018, by venerated Sayadaw Shwe Than Lwin (field notes). The Sayadaw lamented the fact that Buddhists often play recorded music at Kathein, or robe donation, festivals - meaning that they play music in the presence of monks. Monks, the Sayadaw said, do not like this trend but cannot seem to stop it. He recounted that he had recently heard a young novice singing part of a song by Ma Naw (a currently-popular Burmese recording artist); he pointed out that the novice must have listened repeatedly to the song in order to memorize it. The Sayadaw forcefully contrasted listening to music - that is, the forbidden activity - with listening to *dhamma* teaching; listening to *dhamma* teaching, he said, is the beginning of

nirvana. Monks listening to music (that is, monks violating the Seventh Precept), according to this respected Buddhist leader, is behavior worthy of public condemnation. And yet, it was abundantly clear to me - as it is to all Burmese people - that monks do very often listen to music. My subsequent investigation revealed the nuances and contradictions of monks' experiences with, and thoughts about, music.

U Nanda, the thirty-seven year old principal of the Theinwa monastery in Dawei, is typical of the monks I met during the course of my research (interview, July 27, 2019). When I entered his monastery U Nanda was watching television. During our interview, he confirmed that both he and his fellow monk not only hear music on TV, but also listen to music on their cellphones. They download songs that they find, "randomly," he said, on Facebook. Further, they allow donors to broadcast recorded music inside the compound when the monastery hosts donation ceremonies. Asked about any restrictions on music to be broadcast, U Nanda said that it must be "appropriate" and offered that rap music would be inappropriate. Most of U Nanda's brothers in the Burmese *sangha* agree with him. Of the seventeen monasteries I visited, monks at fifteen monasteries said that recorded music was permitted to be played, either projected for all and sundry to hear (usually during donation ceremonies), or listened to in the context of movies and television shows, or listened to on individual devices, or all of the above. I found only two monasteries - one in Dawei, and one in Myin Dike village in central Shan State - in which listening to music was consistently disallowed, even when donors wished to broadcast music to make their donation ceremonies more festive. Based on this evidence, I conclude that for most Burmese monks today, singing and playing musical instruments remains forbidden. However, listening to recorded music is a common activity for the majority of these monks. The general trend among them is: they project "appropriate" music in their compounds,

often choosing recordings in collaboration with donors and festival attendees, and they also listen privately to music that is not considered acceptable for public consumption.

Burmese monks have a variety of opinions regarding the kinds of recorded musics that are appropriate to be projected throughout their compounds. For example, Ashin Aw Ba Tha said that the consensus at his Yangon monastery is that no “noisy” music may be played (interview, May 3, 2018). Any music broadcast at high volume would be problematic, he explained; pressed for examples, he said that recordings by Ma Naw (the artist criticized by Sayadaw Shwe Than Lwin) would be acceptable, but recordings by Lay Phyu, the country’s foremost rock and roll singer, would not be. A group of young monks at a monastery in Mandalay said that only “good music” is supposed to be played at special “music nights” when recordings are shared (interview May 26, 2018). They then engaged in a long discussion of what constituted good music versus bad music, revealing that they have no specific or agreed-upon rules about this. Other monks who live at monasteries in ethnic minority regions allow music that is associated with the local ethnic minority group (and usually sung in that group’s language). For example, U Ar Deik Sa, who lives in Nyang Gone village in Shan State, said that his monastery permits traditional Ta’ang music because this is the music that is treasured by the Ta’ang people in that part of Shan State (interview March 20, 2018).

Most often, monks told me that love songs, meaning songs referencing romantic love (rather than familial love), should not be, and are not, broadcast in their monastery compounds. However, some did admit to privately listening to love songs on their cell phones and Ipods. For example, a monk in Dawei named U Zanaya told me that he listens to Saing Htee Saing and other Burmese pop music stars (interview, July 27, 2019). U Wazira Myana, mentioned at the beginning of this article, was another monk who was forthcoming about his

private music listening. Others were not quite as comfortable discussing this issue; U Ar Lawka, for example, admitted that he listened to music on his cellphone and offered that other monks in his monastery do the same (interview, July 26, 2019). Three monks who overheard him smiled and laughed, but refused to answer questions from me about their own music listening practices. Ultimately, most of the conversations I had with Burmese monks focused on recorded music that is broadcast for all to hear - that is, about the public musical lives of their monasteries - rather than their individual, private, listening habits.

The most-mentioned genre of recorded music that is permitted to be broadcast in Burmese monasteries is *dhamma thachin*, or dharma songs. *Dhamma* is the Pali word for the teaching of the Buddha, and *dhamma thachin* are intended to glorify this body of wisdom. *Dhamma thachin* is a broad category of contemporary recorded music consisting of songs composed in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. This genre includes what fans and practitioners call “morning songs,” which are often broadcast in the early morning to establish a peaceful mood for the day, and “donation songs”, which proclaim the value of making donations and are often played at donation festivals. There are Burmese recording artists who specialize in *dhamma thachin*, including Soe Sandar Tun and Mandalay Thein Zaw, whose names were evoked repeatedly by monks when they gave me examples of permissible music. The lyrical themes in these *dhamma thachin* can be grouped into two categories. Songs in the first category focus on extolling the Buddha and Buddhism. An example from this category includes the words “Praise to the name of Buddha; it’s the most beautiful name, there is no other name like his” (field notes, February 13, 2018). The second category of songs center on exhorting listeners to follow Buddhist teaching. One example from the second category is: “If you listen to [Buddhist] teaching you will feel happy and you will do good things. You must be free from

doubt about the teaching; if so, your life will be full of health and blessings. Pray for all creation to be healthy. The real truth is the *dhamma*” (field notes, February 24, 2018).

I contend that Burmese monks generally believe that *dhamma thachin* constitute “acceptable” music not only because of the lyrics of the songs, but also because these songs sonically reference the pre-colonial past. The creators of *dhamma thachin*, which are recorded with the most sophisticated recording technology available, deploy traditional Burmese instruments and vocal stylings associated with the performance of *thachin kyi* (the “great songs” composed hundreds of years ago). To say it another way, *dhamma thachin* speak the musical language of Burma/Myanmar’s classical music tradition. Although many of them are recently composed, their sound hearkens back to the time before the British colonized Burma and introduced Western European musical ideas about tuning, musical texture, and more. *Dhamma thachin* evoke a mythical past when all Burmese people were (supposedly) faithful Buddhists and when the religion was uncontaminated by contact with Christian and Muslim foreigners. For this reason, this genre of music sounds “appropriate” to monks in ways that rock music and rap music do not.

It is important to note that *dhamma thachin* are not universally acclaimed by monks; at monasteries where no music is ever permitted, these songs are not permitted either. U Pinya Thiri, for example, explained that “there is no musical activity” in his monastery, which is the Zayawadi monastery in Dawei (interview, July 26, 2019). This monastery is “strict” and therefore when monks and novices first arrive, he and his fellow senior monks carefully explain that all of the Eight Precepts are enforced. Specifically, if anyone breaks “the music rule” they will be subject to a punishment such as cleaning toilets. I queried U Pinya Thiri about *dhamma thachin*, given that this genre seemed to be something of an exception at so many other

monasteries. He was well aware of these recordings, defining them as “Buddhist singers singing about Buddhist history and Buddha’s life.” However, he insisted that no one is ever allowed to broadcast these songs during donation ceremonies (or listen privately to them) at his monastery. A *dhamma thachin* is just as forbidden as any other music “because it’s a song.” Furthermore, monks and novices at Zayawadi are not allowed to have cell phones, and when donors visit, they are expected to refrain from listening to music on their cell phones. Similarly, U Yaywada, who lives in a small monastery in Myin Dike village in Shan State, told me that there is no playing (broadcasting) of any music in his monastery (interview, March 21, 2018). He acknowledged that villagers sometimes broadcast music loudly during festivals, and those sounds can be overheard inside the monastery. However, inside their own building the monks only ever listen to recordings of *dhamma* preaching - which may include chanting, but which are distinct from *dhamma thachin* in that the preaching and chanting are definitely not music. U Yaywada summarized by explaining that he and his fellow monks are not allowed to watch live shows or dances, nor to listen to music at any time. The monasteries where U Pinya Thiri and U Yaywada live are, of course, the exceptions to the general trend among monasteries in contemporary Myanmar. For most Burmese monks, listening to recorded music is a regular, if not daily, activity.

Dealing with cognitive dissonance

The situation in which most Burmese Buddhist monks find themselves today constitutes an interesting natural experiment in cognitive dissonance. Leon Festinger published his theory of cognitive dissonance in 1957, and it has proved to be “one of the most influential theories in social psychology” ever since (Harmon-Jones and Mills 2019:3). The theory posits that when a person has two relevant cognitions – defined as “any knowledge, opinion, or belief about the

environment, about oneself, or about one's behavior" (Festinger 1957:3) – and these cognitions conflict, the person will feel uncomfortable, that is, they will experience dissonance. This sense of dissonance then motivates the person "to reduce the dissonance and to avoid increases in the dissonance" (Festinger 1957:31). Since Festinger first outlined his theory, which he acknowledged was "rather simple" (1957:31), scholars have tested and refined it, identifying patterns in what people do and/or say in order to reduce their cognitive dissonance. Over the years, as Anglo-American researchers ran experiments testing cognitive dissonance (often on undergraduate university students), a debate emerged: Does dissonance occur in people from "collectivist," meaning "Asian," cultures (Harmon-Jones and Mills 2019:12)? Studies conducted with research subjects from Japan and China suggests that yes, Festinger's theory holds for people outside of the culture in which he first developed it. In what follows, I argue that when Burmese Buddhist monks are confronted with cognitive dissonance, they too respond in ways that Festinger's theory predicts.

One of the findings of the body of research surrounding cognitive dissonance is that self-consistency is deeply important to people, and indeed, that one's self-esteem is strongly related to one's sense that one behaves in ways that are congruent with one's self-concept (Elliott 1986). "Because most persons have a positive self-concept, persons are more likely to experience dissonance when they behave in a way that they view as incompetent, immoral, or irrational" (Harmon-Jones and Mills 2019:15). Religious traditions assert rules governing morality, and therefore, cognitive dissonance can be especially marked among religious people who behave in ways that are incongruent with the teachings of their faith tradition. Accordingly, scholars have investigated cognitive dissonance reduction strategies among adherents of various religious faiths. For example, Hege Kristin Ringnes and Harald Hegstad (2016) found that

Jehovah's Witnesses who needed surgery deployed a cognitive dissonance reduction strategy when interviewed about their church's teaching that they must refuse blood transmissions, arguing that medical science has advanced to the point that many surgeries can be performed without blood transmissions. In other words, the Jehovah's Witnesses added a new cognitive element that was "consonant with the already existing cognition" (Festinger 1957:264). Clyde Wilcox, Sharon Linzey and Ted G. Jelen (1991) conducted research with members of the state of Indiana's Moral Majority, who are fundamentalist Protestant Christians, finding that these religious subjects behaved similarly. Although they held a "pre-millennial" view of the Christian faith, believing that Jesus Christ would soon return to earth and usher in a new age, they were simultaneously – and illogically – involved in present-day political issues. Rather than adjusting their pre-millennial belief, or scaling down their amount of political activity, the members of the Moral Majority bolstered another cognition, which is that Satan is an active threat to the United States (Wilcox, Linzey and Jelen 1991:254). Focusing on their belief about Satan, which justified their actions, they reduced their cognitive dissonance. Other research conducted among evangelical Protestant Christians in the United States found that lesbian church members (Mahaffy 1996), and members of a "prosperity gospel" church (Shaw 2001) engaged in "selective attention" to Bible passages which contradicted their own behaviors. The lesbian Christians disregarded "the portions of Scripture that are condemning while affirming beliefs and traditions that affirm homosexuals" (Mahaffy 1996:397), while the prosperity gossellers neglected and even re-interpreted the parts of the Bible narrative which reveal that Jesus Christ – the model for their own behavior - was himself poor (Shaw 2001:223). Using Festinger's terms, this research showed that these Christians decreased "the importance of [one of] the elements involved in the dissonant relations" – that is, the teachings of the Bible – in order to reduce their

cognitive dissonance (1957:264). As I explain in what follows, Burmese monks, coming from a different religious tradition and a different cultural background, demonstrated similar cognitive dissonance reduction strategies when they spoke to me about the Seventh Precept and their involvement with music.

Burmese monks are faced with two dissonant cognitions. First, they have devoted themselves to following the *dhamma*, that is, the teaching of the Buddha. The Seventh Precept - articulated, as Theravada Buddhists believe, by the Buddha himself - includes an unambiguous prohibition on monks participating in music. At the same time, most monks live in monasteries where recorded music is frequently broadcast, and increasingly, where listening to music privately (usually on a cellphone) is normalized behavior among their peers. In dealing with the cognitive dissonance that this reality provokes, and which was made explicit when I queried them about the apparent contradiction, monks deployed various cognitive dissonance reduction strategies.

First, and most prominently, Burmese monks decreased the importance of one of their dissonant cognitions (Festinger 1957:264); that is, they emphasized that the Seventh Precept is relatively unimportant, and therefore that violating it is relatively inconsequential. They made comments like, “Breaking the Seventh Precept is a little mistake, a tiny mistake” (Ashin Indavaia, interview, May 26, 2018). U Zanaya explained that “listening to music is like killing a blade of grass while cleaning the [monastery] compound” (interview, July 27, 2019). He went on to compare listening to music to killing an insect while dumping out hot water used for cleaning. In both cases, the monk killed a living being - and therefore violated the monastic rule - but because he did not do it intentionally, “it’s a very small sin,” U Zanaya said. Like many other monks I interviewed, U Zanaya contrasted the Seventh Precept with the first four rules of

the *Patimokkha*, which is the collection of 227 rules that govern Theravada Buddhist monks. These first four rules are prohibitions on “sex, killing a human being, stealing, and falsely pretending to have supernatural powers,” and if a monk violates any one of these, he must be expelled from the monkhood (Talakarathne 2012:50). Findings by other scholars suggest that Burmese monks do take these four rules seriously and consistently follow them, even though, as they admit, the celibacy requirement is especially challenging (Keeler 2017:94; also Spiro 1970:366).

In comparison with these four rules, and the drastic consequence which attaches to their violation, the prohibition on involvement with music is unimportant - at least, that is the contention of most Burmese monks. As one of them said to me: “There are laws and there are bylaws” (Ashin Aw Ba Tha, interview, May 3, 2018). And this is strictly true, according to the *Vinaya Pitakam*, which is the multi-volume commentary on the *Patimokkha*. The second volume of the *Vinaya Pitakam* explains that “the practice of seeing performances or shows involving dancing, singing, and instrumental music is considered a *dukkata* offense for monks....A *dukkata* offense is a light offense” (Carter 1993:230-231).³

Light offenses such as listening to music are dealt with via a “confession” ritual that occurs regularly in monasteries; in some, it even occurs daily (Spiro 1970:303; U Eh Ga Wuntha, interview, July 24, 2019). Ward Keeler, who observed this ritual repeatedly during his tenure at a Mandalay monastery in 2013, describes it as follows: “Monks (but not novices) gather together in groups of three. Two of them recite a phrase; the third one then does so; they continue alternating in this way for a number of phrases. Then the monks go back to their original locations....This interaction, it was explained to me, is when monks “confess” to each other

errors or missteps they have or may have committed. However, the whole exchange is scripted: no actual information is revealed, but rather generic references are made to “infractions, intentional or unintentional” any of them may have made. The interlocutor's response is similarly scripted: he urges the other to be mindful so as to avoid making the same error(s) again” (2017:38).

Generally, no penance is required after monks make their “confessions.” At “strict” monasteries like the two I visited, listening to music does necessitate a penance: cleaning the toilets (U Pinya Thiri, interview, July 26, 2019) or carrying sandbags, for example (U Ar Lawka, interview, July 26, 2019). But for the most part, violating the Seventh Precept is treated as inconsequential in monasteries; monks need not even articulate the words “I listened to music” (and thereby potentially feel shame) when “confessing” this infraction. I contend that the generic nature of the scripted confession ritual tacitly emphasizes the idea that the violations expiated by the ritual are unimportant: the violations need not even be named aloud. This ritual, therefore, helps the monks as they seek to lessen their cognitive dissonance. By “confessing” in such a way, they decrease the importance of their cognition that listening to music is forbidden. This ritual repeatedly affirms to the monks that the prohibition against music is of so little importance that violating it results in no negative outcomes.

Burmese monks also deal with their cognitive dissonance by establishing cognitive overlap. This process involves “discovering or creating elements corresponding to the chosen alternative that are identical with favorable elements that already exist for the corresponding unchosen alternative” (Festinger 1957:46). For the majority of Burmese monks, their chosen alternative is to listen to music. Their unchosen alternative is to obey the Seventh Precept; stated more broadly, their unchosen alternative is to follow the teaching of the Buddha. When they

establish cognitive overlap, monks explain that listening to music is, in fact, a way of following the Buddha's teaching or a way of imitating his example. They assert that just as the Buddha articulated laws which were appropriate for his time, so modern-day monks must discern which practices are appropriate for their own time (Ashin Indaka, interview, May 26, 2018). It is important to be "adaptable," they say (U Meitiya, interview, April 14, 2018). As Ashin Aw Ba Tha put it, "The Buddha said there is no right and wrong; it's all situational. So we should not take any statement as a fixed idea" (interview, May 3, 2018). While establishing this cognitive overlap, monks pointed to an important theme in the Buddha's teaching, that of "the value of direct experience" (Carrithers 2001:38). The Buddha taught his followers not to unthinkingly accept claims of authoritative knowledge, such as might be issued by kings, or religious teachers of the past, or holy texts. Rather, he encouraged them to investigate the nature of reality by themselves, assuming the potential of every individual to discover wisdom, primarily through meditation. "The consequences of this attitude appear throughout the Buddha's mature teaching. 'Know not by hearsay, nor by tradition ... nor by indulgence in speculation ... nor because you honour [the word of] an ascetic; but know for yourselves'" (Carrithers 2001:38). In establishing their cognitive overlap, the monks point out that by listening to music (or at least, by questioning the prohibition against it) they are obeying one of the Buddha's most important injunctions, which is to discern for themselves what is required, rather than to simply accept the ancient teaching of the Seventh Precept. During interviews with me, assertions like these were immediately followed by examples of how listening to music might even be beneficial, or as cognitive dissonance researchers would put it, by a "spreading of the alternatives."

When people attempt to reduce their cognitive dissonance by engaging in a spreading of alternatives, they either "increase the relative attractiveness of the chosen alternative," or

“decrease the relative attractiveness of the unchosen alternative” (Festinger 1957:47). This is a result of what dissonance researchers call the free-choice paradigm, which asserts that people experience cognitive dissonance after making a choice between two alternatives. After making the choice, the person is likely to express a preference for the chosen alternative. Burmese monks experiencing the cognitive dissonance that arises from choosing to listen to music (their chosen alternative), rather than obeying the Seventh Precept (their unchosen alternative), ultimately view “the chosen alternative as more desirable and the rejected alternative as less desirable” (Harmon-Jones and Mills 2019:5). Accordingly, the monks explain that listening to music can be beneficial for a number of reasons.

For example, U Meitiya said listening to, and even memorizing, a *dhamma thachin* is helpful because in so doing a monk can “gain a lesson” about Buddhism from the song, a lesson which he can transmit later in sermons (interview, April 14, 2018). In his view, listening to this genre of music is a better alternative than refusing all musics because the *dhamma* songs can increase his own and his followers’ understanding of Buddhism. Monks who are part of an English-language club at a monastery in Mandalay told me that listening to recordings of English-language songs helps them to improve their English (Ashin Indaka, interview, May 26, 2018). This is valuable because Buddhism is a missionary religion, and its followers are committed to propagating it around the world. Myanmar underwent a democratic transition in 2015, and in recent years has seen a great increase in the number of English-speaking expatriates who visit or work long-term in the country. Burmese monks are therefore concerned to master English, so as to be able to communicate with potential new converts to Buddhism. Listening to English-language songs, therefore, is a more attractive alternative for faithful Buddhist monks than is obeying the Seventh Precept. Another example: monks in a small Pa-O village in Shan

State are deeply concerned to help the villagers, who belong to a minority population in Myanmar, to sustain their Pa-O language and cultural heritage. Therefore, as one monk explained, they intentionally broadcast “traditional Pa-O songs and modern Pa-O songs” using their monastery’s sound system (U Thiri Dhamma, interview, March 22, 2018). Additionally, about a decade ago, the monks actually created a recording on which they sang in the Pa-O language. After taking this initiative, they discussed it in light of the Seventh Precept, and decided that they would not sing on future recordings, but that they would continue to lead recording projects and help with organizing such projects. Quoting another monk, U Thiri Dhamma said, “If we monks don’t participate in the music, in preparing and recording it, the Pa-O culture will not be maintained and developed.” U Thiri Dhamma and his colleagues clearly view their involvement in music as superior to their unchosen alternative, that is, to strictly following the Seventh Precept.

In spreading their alternatives, Burmese monks also point out the disadvantage of their unchosen alternative, that is, to forbid all instances of music listening in their compounds. The English-language club members in Mandalay articulated the principal disadvantage. Their monastery, they explained, not only projects recorded music, but also allows novices to listen to music individually using earphones and even host “music nights” from time to time (interview May 26, 2018). It is important to allow musical entertainment within their precinct, because to forbid it would be a “discouragement” to novices (who are future monks) and to students at their monastery school (who are future novices). Discouraging young people from entering the monkhood is deeply unwise; after all, monasteries around the country already are having difficulty attracting and retaining novices. “Strict” monasteries, these monks claimed, can no longer attract novices at all. As a monk in Shan State summarized it: “Obeying the Seventh

Precept is important, yes, but if monks had to obey all eight precepts perfectly, there would be no monks!” (U Yaywada, interview, March 21, 2018).

While it is not precisely accurate that the “strictest” monasteries garner zero interest from prospective monks, the concern is logical. As far back as the 1960s, researcher Melford Spiro noted that the boredom of life inside a monastery was one of the major obstacles to recruiting boys and men to the monkhood (1970:329-331). Monks are the beating heart of Theravada Buddhism; not only do they provide moral guidance to lay Buddhists, they also constitute a “field of merit” for laypeople because, in accepting their donations, the monks allow the laypeople to earn good karma, or merit (Kawanami 2020). It is therefore essential to the future of the religion that boys and young men commit themselves to becoming monks. For monks focused on the sustainability of the monkhood, the unchosen alternative (to forbid music inside their monastery) is so unattractive that it effectively lessens the cognitive dissonance they feel when they contemplate the Seventh Precept.

Obeying the Seventh Precept: cultivating detachment

What are we to make of the arguments of the minority of Burmese monks who insist on following the Seventh Precept? I contended above that monks who listen to music experience cognitive dissonance, and that they deploy predictable strategies in lessening that dissonance. The arguments they make as they engage in this exercise - that the Seventh Precept is relatively unimportant, that Buddhism obligates monks to discern the wisest course of action for themselves, and that their choice to allow music in their communities is clearly the superior alternative - are not selfish rationalizations of hypocritical behavior. Rather, these arguments are logical, and flow from realities and streams of thought long established in Myanmar. In what

follows, I assert that monks who take the opposite stance also have logical support for their own position, and that the arguments in favor of restricting access to music are buttressed by research conducted in the field of music cognition.

The monk who spoke at greatest length to me in outlining the argument against listening to music was U Eh Ga Wuntha, the eighty-seven year old leader of a monastery and monastic school in Dawei. Like so many of his brother monks, he acknowledged that the Seventh Precept is “a small rule, a small case” in comparison to the first four rules of the *Patimokkha* (interview July 24, 2019). But, he said repeatedly, breaking a small rule can be a grave act. For one thing, spending time listening to music is a waste of time that could more usefully be devoted to meditation. U Eh Ga Wuntha went on to articulate a “slippery slope” argument, contending that breaking small rules can lead to breaking other rules, and the consequences of breaking the “large” rules can be extremely serious: “You should keep all the rules, because if you start by ignoring the small ones, eventually you will break the big ones.” U Eh Ga Wuntha made numerous analogies: the child who is not disciplined for childish misbehaviors and grows up to become a criminal, the addict who starts by taking just one pill and graduates to stealing money to buy drugs, the patient whose small cancerous growth is ignored and who ultimately dies of cancer, and the alcoholic who begins by drinking just one drink and eventually loses his health. Reinforcing the addiction metaphor contained in two of his examples, U Eh Ga Wuntha argued that “It is possible to get addicted to movies and music. That’s why it’s better to follow the small rules. Breaking small rules will condition you to stop taking rules seriously. You will think, ‘It’s no big thing’. But the Buddha said we should follow these rules, no matter what our situation. These rules protect us from danger. In every era, Buddha’s word is true, and it is for the best, for our goodness.”

What U Eh Ga Wuntha referred to as “addiction” is more usually called “attachment” by Buddhists. In his first sermon, the Buddha taught that the source of human suffering is attachment. Attachment is also translated in English as “craving” or “desire” (Nimanong 2008:176). To be liberated from suffering requires that one cease to be attached to physical sensations, ideas, and desires of all kinds. Thus, the goal of Buddhist monks’ practice is the cultivation of detachment. “Only by the destruction of all emotion - i.e. by the attainment of detachment, can the cessation of rebirth and thus the end of suffering be attained” (Spiro: 1970:48). Given that monasteries are intended to be places where monks can pursue detachment from desires (for all things, including sex, material possessions, food, and of course music), it makes sense that abbots might disallow all instances of listening to music. Music is in essence a temptation to attachment and is therefore antithetical to the purpose of monastic life. But, as we have seen, music is ubiquitous in most monasteries, and therefore, attachment to music was a main topic of conversation with the monks I interviewed for this project.

All the Burmese Buddhist monks I spoke with believed that it is possible to become attached to music, and they mostly agreed that choosing to listen to music constitutes attachment to it. To use the English expression, overhearing music is not particularly problematic, but if a monk intentionally chooses to listen to music, he demonstrates attachment to it (U Pinya Thiri, interview, July 26, 2019; also U Zanaya, interview, July 27, 2019). In explaining this, Ashin Nya Nya Siri, a monk in Pakokku, asked me a rhetorical question: “If you go to a shop, you will buy the item that you like, correct? It’s the same with music. When you choose to listen [to a particular recording], this is proof that you have an attachment [to that music]” (interview, June 22, 2019). Ashin Aw Ba Tha explained that this understanding is derived from a story about the Buddha himself (interview, May 3, 2018). According to the story, there was once a *nat* (a

spiritual being) who played a harp, performing two songs in front of the Buddha. The first song was about missing his lover, and the second song was an appreciation of the Buddha and his *dhamma*. When the *nat* finished performing, the Buddha said, “Both songs are very beautiful!” But - as Ashin Aw Ba Tha emphasized - the Buddha did not ask the *nat* to sing either of the songs again. “The Buddha accepted reality but was not attached to it. My perspective is, if you listen to music [in your vicinity] you are accepting reality, but if you choose to listen again and again, that’s attachment.”⁴

Although Burmese monks evidently have a broad consensus, believing that to intentionally choose to listen to music is to be attached to it, they differ in their understanding of the phenomenological experience of being attached to music. For example, some said that one can know one is attached to a song if one “follows along” in one’s mind (U Thiri Dhamma, interview, March 18, 2018; U Wazira Myana, interview, July 27, 2019). Others said that enjoying a song, even if one did not set out to listen to it, is proof of attachment. As one young monk told me, “If I hear music and I find myself thinking, ‘This is sweet,’ or ‘I like this music,’ I know I am attached to it. Listening for pleasure is attachment” (Ashin Kyi Namda, interview, May 26, 2018). U Ar Deik Sa referenced both of these points in saying, “It’s crucial not to get attached. To avoid this, don’t enjoy [the song], and don’t sing along with it, even in your mind” (interview March 20, 2018). Other monks focused not on enjoying a song, nor on listening intently to it, but rather wishing to hear it repeatedly as the fundamental experience of attachment. And so they said things like, “Being attached to music is wanting to listen to it, or to watch videos, every day” (U Zinn Janita, interview, April 13, 2018). U Wa Ya Thami explained it thus: “Attachment is liking a song and desiring to listen to it over and over. And if you cannot [listen to the song] you will feel upset or depressed” (interview, July 25, 2019).

Other monks believe that attachment is inevitable; it requires no focused or repeated listening, nor an emotional response. For example, U Meitiya, who was quoted above on the advantages of *dhamma thachin*, claimed that it is impossible to listen to any music (other than *dhamma thachin*) without becoming attached to it (interview, April 14, 2018). In this understanding of attachment, “if you choose to listen to a song, you will *automatically* like it. And liking it means you are attached to it. Choosing to listen is fulfilling a desire” (U Ar Lawka, interview, July 26, 2019; my emphasis). U Nanda, who agreed with this perspective, made a distinction between two kinds of attachment. He said, “When you hear a song you automatically become attached. If you decide later that you like the song, this is another kind of attachment” (interview, July 27, 2019).

Burmese monks’ perspectives on attachment to music vary. They do not all agree with U Nanda that attachment occurs inevitably at the moment of deciding to listen to musical sounds. However, most of them share the same experience in their monasteries: recorded music is often played for all to hear, monks and novices often watch films and videos which include music, and individuals often listen to recorded music using devices such as cell phones and Ipads (donated by generous laypeople) (Keeler 2017:67). As Ashin Indivaia laughingly revealed, at his monastery, if monks were required to list their specific infractions during the “confession” ritual, monks would be admitting to listening to music “almost every night!” (interview, May 26, 2018). In sum, most monks are finding themselves attached to, and are even actively promoting their own attachment to, music. This being the case, their music listening constitutes an impediment on the path to their spiritual liberation.

The contentions of monks like U Eh Ga Wuntha - who, as explained above, believes that listening to music can become an addiction - are reinforced by the findings of scholars of music

cognition. Over the past thirty years, researchers have established that listening to recorded music induces pleasure in listeners. Jaap Panksepp labeled this pleasurable feeling “the chills,” explaining it as a “bodily ‘rush’ [which] is commonly described as a spreading gooseflesh, hair-on-end feeling that is common on the back of the neck and head and often moves down the spine....” (1995:173). Panksepp argued that the feeling could justly be labeled a “skin orgasm” (1995:203), and called for further research using brain imaging techniques “to help explain why music can become ‘addictive’” (1995:202). Anne J. Blood and Robert J. Zatorre (2001) responded to Panksepp’s call by studying the heart rate, respiration, and cerebral blood flow changes (using positron emission topography or PET scan) in ten undergraduate students who listened to self-selected recordings. Blood and Zatorre concluded that “music recruits neural systems of reward and emotion similar to those known to respond specifically to biologically relevant stimuli, such as food and sex, and those that are artificially activated by drugs of abuse. This is quite remarkable because music is neither strictly necessary for biological survival or reproduction, nor is it a pharmacological substance” (2001:11823). Continuing to investigate the pleasurable response to music via neural imaging, a 2005 study showed that “passive listening to music resulted in significant activation of a network of subcortical structures” in the brain, and that “it is likely that the rewarding and reinforcing aspects of listening to music are mediated by increased dopamine levels” (Menon and Levitin 2005:181-182).

These studies, and others that affirm their findings (see Harrison and Loui 2014), suggest that when monks listen to music, their brains will react as do other humans’ brains. Specifically, the monks will feel pleasure, pleasure that can be compared to sexual release, and this pleasure can become “addictive” because it engages the same brain structures as do illicit drugs. Expressed in Buddhist terms, this research confirms that listening to music fosters one’s

attachment to it, because music evokes pleasure that listeners desire (we could say “crave”) to experience again. Further, if monks continue listening to the same songs or genres of music, exposing themselves to these stimuli repeatedly, their enjoyment of those songs will increase. Familiarity with a music cultivates liking of that music, as researchers have demonstrated through measurement of “activations in the limbic, paralimbic and reward circuits of the brain” (Swaminathan and Schellenberg 2015:193). Thus, if monks keep on listening to particular musics, they will become more familiar with those musics, and therefore will like them more - that is, they will become even more attached to those musics.

It is worth pointing out that the scholars listed above, and most of their colleagues in the field of music cognition, make their conclusions based on experiments conducted with Westerners (usually undergraduate university students) who listen to Western classical music (Harrison and Loui 2014). Their implicit assumptions are also shaped by Western ideas - for example, they assume at the outset that the pleasure induced by music listening is a good and beneficial phenomenon. This literature takes no account of the idea that attachment to music could be problematic and even undesired. It would be interesting, and probably revealing, to study the effect of music listening on the brains of Burmese Buddhists who usually avoid listening to music, such as monks at “strict” monasteries. Ingrid Jordt’s scholarly portrait of meditators at a Burmese meditation center provides an indication of why such a study might prove intriguing: Jordt interviewed a meditator who said that he had passed through the eighth level of insight promised by vipassana meditation (there are sixteen levels in total). The meditator said that as a result of his meditation practice, he felt “a feeling of weariness for the things of the world. I would go to the theater and listen to the music, but all these pleasures felt empty to me. In fact, I felt a kind of disgust for them even though I used to love to go to the

theater in the past” (Jordt 2007:80). This meditator’s experience may resonate with that of monks like U Pinya Thiri and U Yaywada, who never listen to or overhear music at their monasteries - or, it may not. Although it would likely be compelling for a certain scholarly audience, no Western scientific study is necessary to validate the ideas and arguments of Burmese monks who rigorously follow the Seventh Precept.

Conclusion

Burmese Buddhist monks acknowledge Buddhism’s Seventh Precept as authoritative. They remain much more conservative than Mahayana Buddhist monks in other countries, in that they avoid singing and playing musical instruments. However, most of them do listen to recorded music using the sound systems at their monasteries, requiring only that the music broadcast in this way be “appropriate.” They exhibit strong agreement on the appropriateness of *dhamma thachin*, and given the extent to which this genre is heard in monasteries, we might even say that Burmese monks are patrons of this genre of music. The monks reveal their kinship with all of humanity in the ways that they deal with the cognitive dissonance that their musical involvement provokes. They also affirm the findings of Western researchers in music cognition (albeit without referencing this research) when they assert that that listening to music can foster pleasure, and that this pleasure can become addictive - an attachment, the monks say. They agree unanimously that to be attached to music is a violation of the Seventh Precept. They exhibit a variety of perspectives, however, on what it means, exactly, to be attached to music, and on the seriousness of violating this prohibition. In sum, Burmese Buddhist monks of the twenty-first century are a united but heterogeneous group.

Notes

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¹ The country is known by both names. In this article I refer to it as Myanmar when discussing events and conversations which occurred after 1990, and as Burma when referring to an earlier time period and when quoting other scholars.

² The Eight Precepts are sometimes subdivided and rewritten as ten precepts.

³ Interestingly, the *Vinaya Pitakam* explains that listening to music is a more consequential violation of the rule for Buddhist nuns. “This practice is considered a *paccitiya* offense for nuns...A *paccitiya* offense is more serious in that it puts a person in a state requiring expiation or rectification before the person is again considered of proper disposition” (Carter 1993:231).

⁴ The story told by Ashin Aw Ba Tha may be a gloss of a story found in the Buddhist scriptures titled the *Digha-nikaya*, and which is recounted at length in Carter 1993:137-140.

