

## Skillful Means and the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Buddhist Artist

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For better or for worse, each one of us is now a member of a truly global community. From a Buddhist perspective, one can say that it has always been this way and that popular culture and global economics are simply catching up. However, there is a particular momentum, derived from technology, art, economics and human curiosity that make this period in history one of unprecedented potential for growth and understanding of our common bonds. Indeed, the world has become open to all of us, and so as a first-generation-American son of Ghanaian immigrants who happens to be a practicing Theravadin Buddhist and a hip hop artist, I find myself at the front of this new global revolution of thought, behavior and culture. In short, I see myself as a pioneer of the Dharma in an ambiguous new land – that of modern popular culture.

America, like most of us, is incessantly at odds with its ideals and its actions. A majority Christian nation, founded on highly conservative Puritanical beliefs, America is known worldwide more for its military might, and its material excess. Even in times of deep recession and austerity, America's fascination with extravagance, sexuality and violence rarely wanes. It can be said that the US's primary export is culture, driven primarily by the influence of celebrities – singers, rappers, musicians and actors. Globally, this culture is not usually interpreted as being anything remotely spiritual, in fact quite the opposite. It is surprising then, that within the context of a society blighted with celebrity driven abject materialism, so many popular American and global megastars have embraced Buddhism as their religion or way of life. How can this be? How can the Dharma of the Buddha, whose very tenets rest upon the notion that desire is the root of suffering, be reconciled with the sex, drugs and rock and roll culture of the West, and increasingly, the world? I believe this can be answered in a simple word: awareness.

Throughout the 2,600 year history of the Turning of the Wheel of Dharma, the Buddha's teachings have meandered around the globe and like the famous quote from Bruce Lee in "Enter the Dragon", the Dharma has moved like water, in each nation and lo, with each person, assuming the shape of its new container (culture, nationality, ontology) while maintaining its essential qualities – non violence, contemplation, and compassion with a view towards spiritual liberation. Arriving on the shores of the West at the hands of such luminaries as Madam H.P. Blavatsky and Henry Steel Olcott in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, Buddhism began its slow, patient, yet deliberate courtship with the American psyche. Like a Casanova, having long learned the art of seduction by finding the emotional and psychological weaknesses in a potential lover, the Dharma, simply by remaining true to its essential principles, consistently offered a remarkable alternative to the traditional American lifestyle. Instead of war it offered peace, instead of fear it offered security, instead of faith in an unknown it offered confidence in self-development. In short, the Dharma presented America with a counterintuitive life path that ironically offered more freedom than the recklessness so embedded in its cultural DNA.

As a foreign faith in a semi hostile environment in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, Buddhist thought and practice remained on the fringes of American culture for decades, finding itself embraced by communities that were for the most part cultural outcasts. From the Theosophists to the Beatniks to the Hippies to the New Agers, Buddhism remained the mistress of American spirituality. Indulged but not fully engaged, borrowed from but not

totally committed to, it was only in the hearts of poets and personalities like Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac, and the brave western monastic pioneers who adopted the Dharma as a way of life. It is no surprise then, that along the fringes of American society, where drugs, sex, music and visual art were quietly shaping the overall cultural statement of the nation, Buddhism would find a home. This, however, raises the question of how and why did the artistic, fringe culture that found itself fascinated by Eastern thought, reconcile its excesses with the presumed modesty of the Dharma? Could it be that the process of creating art - meditative in its development and lending itself to a religious experience at the climax of its expression – was akin to the contemplative practices espoused by the Buddha? Could it be that the teachings of the Dharma – about karma and the essential bond shared between all beings, was in accord with the effects of mind-altering drugs like marijuana and hallucinogens - used by many in arts communities - which often create an awareness of universal interconnectedness and a euphoric affinity towards compassionate regard for others? Was the adoption of Buddhism by artists just another way to rebel against parent, God and country? Did the Dharma present less of a guilt trip for less than pious activity? Or was it something deeper that attracted the artist to the Buddha? Could it be that the Buddha's exhortation to his disciples to "see things as they are" was in perfect harmony with the artists silent mandate to relate to the world and express the understanding based on that relation in as true and honest a way as possible?

In Bob Marley's song "Jah Live" he quotes a passage from the Book of Proverbs in the Bible "The truth is an offence, but not a sin." It was with this sensibility that many artists began to express themselves as Buddhism began to take serious hold in the West. No piece greater exemplifies this than renowned poet Allen Ginsberg's "Why I Meditate":

*I sit because the Dadaists screamed on Mirror Street*  
*I sit because the Surrealists ate angry pillows*  
*I sit because the Imagists breathed calmly in Rutheford and Manhattan*  
*I sit because 2400 years*  
*I sit in America because Buddha saw a corpse in Lumbini*  
*I sit because the Yippies whooped up Chicago's teargas skies once*  
*I sit because no because*  
*I sit because I was unable to trace the Unborn back to the womb*  
*I sit because it's easy*  
*I sit because I get angry if I don't*  
*I sit because they told me to*  
*I sit because I read about it in the Funny Papers*  
*I sit because I had a vision also dropped LSD*  
*I sit because I don't know what else to do like Peter Orlovsky*  
*I sit because after Lunacharsky got fired and Stalin gave Zhadnov a special tennis court I became a rootless cosmopolitan*  
*I sit inside the shell of the old me*  
*I sit for world revolution.*

In this poem we can see cultural, political and self awareness emboldened by Buddhist practice as espoused by one of America's greatest poets. If we read Ginsberg's poem as a snapshot of Buddhism's interaction with the American artistic psyche in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, we can see that the practice of "bare attention" encouraged by Buddhist meditative thought is embedded in the way the artist sees his or her world. An artist must naturally be self aware in order to perfect his or her art. He or she must strive continually

to be a genuine interpreter of reality, and to express an understanding of reality from personal experience that somehow speaks universally. Without paying attention to the *dhammas* of inner and outer life, an artist can be only minimally effective at best.

In light of the above, we are still left with the problem of Buddhist ethical conduct in conflict with free artistic expression. How does the *Siladhamma* accept the artistic use of profanity, violence, sexuality and mind altering substances? Does it accept it at all? From the violent films of Jet Li (a Tibetan Buddhist), Oliver Stone (a Buddhist), Steven Seagal (a Tibetan Buddhist) to the profanity-laden lyrics of Wu-Tang Clan's Robert Diggs aka, 'The RZA' (a quasi-Buddhist), to the material excesses and sometimes profane imagery explored in my own music, are we as Buddhist artists disrespecting the very religion and life-path we hold dear in our exercise of free expression? Or is there something deeper and more subtle taking place? Has the Dharma meandered its way into a cup of grotesque design that deceptively serves to more clearly heighten its innate, non-dual purity? Begging the forgiveness of an admitted bias, I dare to say the answer is YES.

In 2002, I cofounded a hip hop group called Shambhala with my friend and spiritual brother, Agua. Myself being Buddhist and Agua being a Taoist and the both of us being African American, infused our music with a very unique combination of Eastern spirituality, Black nationalism, street wise reflections and an overall "otherworldly" aura. Our debut album "The Lotus Of..." featured an image of the Buddha on the front cover enshrined in a boarder of crimson and gold, with the mantra "Om Mani Padme Hum" subtly appearing in the background of the imagery several times over. Our song titles were written in English, however the font used was made to look like Sanskrit. We gave our songs such lofty names as "Full Moon of the Tao", "Enlightenment", "Siddhartha", "Catch The Message", "The Wind" and more. Not ones for mere imagery, our lyrics were indelibly woven with the deepest themes of the Dharma here is an excerpt of my verse in our marquee song, "Enlightenment".

*"Communion/I offering into fusion/bless-ed sacrament the union/the illusion/blinking through the mirror of time/the doorway to enter divine/realization of mind as the vehicle/seeping through the cracks of seeking truth in fact/leaking through the black void combination of wisdom and merit I/shift the paradigm/lifting the apparent mind/be aware of singles/single pointed concentration paralyzed in the lotus posture/parallel to open altars holy sons and higher daughters in the feast of silent presence/like the essence of an un-speakable phenomenon/the Buddha-mind is un-reachable when one has gone beyond/sensory perception/unattached to the melodic song the pillar that the prophet's on supports the roof of heaven/ - shoot through the dimension transcending disembodied moving lucid through convention as a river to the emptiness/shining from the western paradise with Amitabha Buddha I recall the sutras and I bow at my masters feet...."*

Anyone versed in Buddhist thought, or even remotely interested in the conceptual basis of Buddhism would find the above verse highly invigorating and perhaps even special. And in fact many did. To this day Shambhala has fans around the world. From New York to Taipei, there remain several high minded individuals who continue to be inspired by our music and its message. There was, however a problem: authenticity.

In my analysis, the music of Shambhala had two fundamental weaknesses. I must pause here to say that my interpretations are my own and my brother Agua may feel differently about my observations. Also, in discussing what I perceive to be weaknesses

in our operation, I can only speak of my own artistic weaknesses, as my brother may very well not have been in lockstep with me in my own process of growth and development. However, since we were a duo, even one member's weakness was enough to be cancerous, and only compounded moreso if both of us shared shortcomings. That said, I became increasingly aware that the audience most receptive to Shambhala, were people who were either scholastically educated or self-educated to a high degree. Whether street smart or book smart, a Shambhala fan was SMART - in a unique way. Our fans hungered for knowledge and self-development and our music provided a soundtrack for their inner endeavors. While our relationship with our fans was beautiful and special, sadly a fanbase with such lofty ideals, in the context of the global population, was highly concentrated and represented a niche. We were, to coin a cliché, "preaching to the choir". Our fans were already on their own paths of self-cultivation, and whether Shambhala existed or not, many of them would have still been committed to their journeys. As an artist, I wanted more. I wanted to make an impact with those who had no knowledge of the Path. I wanted to reach those who were suffering the most, those who were embroiled in materialism and the ignorant pursuit of material fulfillment as a means to lasting happiness. But my inner conflict with Shambhala's music did not stop there. As evidenced in the verse quoted above, our music always spoke from the perspective of the spiritually advanced, or even the already enlightened. Put modestly, this was a little distant from the truth. While we were dedicated, devoted practitioners, striving daily to live up to the ideals of our group and our spiritual paths, we in Shambhala were not saints. I certainly was not. I was still struggling in my practice, struggling with anger, lust, confusion and greed, I was using intoxicants and behind closed doors, I was not living up the ideals presented in my music. In the end, I felt that my life was at odds with my art, and so I decided to leave the group.

After I left Shambhala, I contemplated leaving music behind completely. My contemplation was short lived. I knew music was what I wanted and needed to do as an artist, and that I wanted to share my unique perspective with the world. If I was going to continue to make music however, I would do so only if I was not confined to a particular spiritual aesthetic, both in sound and in dress (in Shambhala we often wore huge Buddhist Malas and colorful African garbs). If I was going to be reborn as a solo artist, I would be reborn in the image of the common-man, not the quasi-monk. I was, however not sure of this approach, and so I sought the counsel of my dear friend and teacher, the Ugandan monk Bhante Buddharakkhita. I asked Bhante if he thought that my idea of toning down the overt spiritual themes in my music and image was perhaps a more effective way to introduce Dharma themes to a larger audience. He unhesitatingly said "Yes".

I must also pause here and remind the reader that Bhante Buddharakkhita is a Theravadin Buddhist Monk, and as such, he does not listen to popular music as it is prohibited by the *Vinaya* rules. I do not want to give the impression that Bhante has listened to my new material (some of which contains very secular themes and language) and endorses it. Rather, Bhante counseled and encouraged me in the direction of toning down what may have been seen as a proselytizing message in my work with Shambhala to something more subtle and more nuanced, and more honest. I wanted to meet my audience where they were and share my experience. I also wanted to let myself off the hook so to speak and be a little more of a lay person.

For the greater part of 10 years (coinciding with the years I spent in Shambhala), I was striving in my *vipassana* practice with an intensity that bordered on neurosis. I would feel terrible guilt if I ever missed a sitting or didn't sit long enough, I would read nothing but Dharma books, spend hours away from my family meditating in woods and graveyards and idolized such luminaries as Ajahn Mun Bhuridatta, HH The XIV Dalai

Lama, Ajahn Lee Dhammadharo, Mae Chee Kaew and others (they remain my heroes to this day). I felt a quiet urge to become a monastic, and as such I attempted to live as much of a monk's lifestyle as I could muster. Musically I was only interested in communicating the most complex Dharma themes, even if I hadn't truly experienced them for myself. All of this was delusion. I was a father, a husband, a musician, a householder. But I was practicing in a way that neglected these truths. My relationship to my practice had quietly become a form of suffering. I needed to relax and accept my position as a householder and remove the thorn of guilt and neurosis from my mind. This acceptance would include the way I made my music and would begin a series of counterintuitive transformations in my life

I often say that the Buddha's path to liberation is completely counterintuitive to the samsaric mind. While we believe that the pursuit of our desires will bring us lasting happiness, the Dharma teaches us the exact opposite. True happiness is achieved through the resisting our unexamined impulses and through selfless acts of compassion and generosity. In considering the often ironic nature of the Buddhadharma, I thought to myself that perhaps I could make more of a spiritual impact on the world if my music was actually less spiritual (at least on the surface). Bhante Buddharakkhita summed it up this way: "The Dharma is a jewel, and even the smallest jewel is more valuable than a huge pile of trash, so small references to Dharma themes in your music will make a deeper impact with a wider audience." It was with this reasoning that I began to record my first solo album "Tomorrow is Today".

"Tomorrow is Today" marked a departure in style and sound for me and many were shocked by it. Gone were the ornate sounds of gongs and chanting in my music, replaced by a more driving, urgent electronic sound behind my vocals. Gone were references to Zazen, single pointed concentration and bowing to masters, replaced by songs that acknowledged everyday desires and impulses in the light of self awareness. In short, I was being honest with where I was in my life, still attracted to the illusions of the world, but armed with the power of the Dharma so as to not be totally taken in by them. I was not a monk, I was a meditator, living in the world. The lyrics on "Tomorrow is Today" transitioned seamlessly from the brazenly materialistic to the inspirationally spiritual as evidenced in my song "New Generation":

**Verse 1:** *"Don't wait 'cause the time is now/ and tomorrow's too late to rewind the dial/ 300 C with the suicide doors/we could never let em know what you and I saw/ new rap king and I'm rulin' by law use that thing baby you can try more/jewels that bling baby we can buy more/no friends please only two in my Porsche/zoom and ride off on the Sunset Strip/ one mo' let it go/but it come back quick/ when the drum track hit and I hear 'em go ape sh\*t? cope another whip with a Kurt Cobain kit word game famous/they can't change us/Born I and that's word to my name, Cuz/and for my people getting loose when at the day's end, I did it all for the new generation.*

**Verse 2:** *"You gotta love it I'm a cool breath of fresh air/'cause my style's right now and and it's next year/I get it on don't confuse me with other guys/call my garage a cocoon for the butterflies/I meditate/ stay awake when its late at night/I'm feelin great tell 'em space is a state of mind/and when the stress gets ugly from the pain inside/remember when I had nothing couldn't make a dime/ hands up if it feels good to live life/and even when it gets dark you can still shine/so when they ask you how you feelin tell em hyped up/see I be chillin four wheelin in a white truck/plot thicken/clock's tickin and the time's up/new blood*

*move up show my crew love/the beat is hittin and the groove is amazing/I did it all for the new generation*

From the above two verses, we can see clearly the change in my solo content from my previous work. My new material was more compelling, more interesting and more street wise, than the “top-down” model used when I was in Shambhala. This angered some in my core audience who interpreted this shift as backsliding and selling out, but overwhelmingly the response was positive, and not only that, the response was widespread. People felt that I was speaking to them and to the inner conflict that all of us face between our material desires and our spiritual impulses. “Tomorrow is Today” was jokingly described by one listener as “schizophrenic” in that it leapt back and forth between themes and concepts in the same way we notice the mind leaping back and forth when examined in meditation.

My new material was certainly effective. I had traded in my mala for a platinum chain, albeit with a Buddhist amulet as its pendant. I was mainstream. My music contained references to common aims and desires for wealth and fame, as well as my scrutiny of those desires under the lens of Buddhist meditation. Clothes, cars, women, money, insight, meditation, self-reflection and liberation all became interwoven topics in lyrics that sometimes contained profanity over beats tailor made for dance clubs. So, was this Dharma?

In February of 2011, I was interviewed by Rod Meade Sperry for an article in Shambhala Sun’s online magazine “Sunspace” about my album “Tomorrow is Today”. When asked about whether my music was still in line with my Dharma roots I replied “Yes”. My argument was that my music was a form of *upaya*, or skillful means, and while I may be using secular topics more regularly, and my language may be more gruff, ultimately the purpose of my music was to show how attractive and enthralling sensual desires are and to be honest about that, and then to also help both the listener and myself come to an understanding that ultimately sensual desires are impermanent and not the true source of happiness. I felt that by offering a mode to the listener where he or she did not have to feel guilty about having material desires, instead what I offered my music was an alternative: the pursuit of righteous wealth. I had come to terms with being a householder, and like Anathapindika, the wealthy merchant who supported the Sangha in the time of the Buddha, I realized that I could be of better service to the world if I pursued wealth in order to use my influence for the good of living beings. *Upaya*. Below is an excerpt from a recent interview I did with a magazine called Beltway Bounce, which sums up my position on the matter.

**Beltway Bounce:** *Let’s touch on your Buddhist faith. This is something that I know very little about. Does this influence your music at all – as far as what you can and can’t do or anything?*

**Born I Music:** *“It’s interesting. Yes, it does inform my music. It’s funny because I’m packing right now and I’m finding all of these old lyrics. It’s just amazing to me to see how much I’ve written. I’ve got books worth of rhymes and I can see my progression as an artist in all of those old rhymes. Earlier in my music, when I was just discovering Buddhism, my writings were very, very idealistic. All about spirituality and enlightenment. That’s mostly what people knew me for. They identified me with that. What people don’t know is that while I was writing from the perspective of someone that was already spiritually realized, I was still [heavily attracted to materialism]. Keeping all that stuff secret. I was putting forth*

*an image of someone who was spiritually advanced and not really touching on the human things....that spiritually advanced people still do. They just do it from an advanced place. [laughs] I think that's what the disconnect was with Shambhala and the people sometimes. I once read an article reviewing Shambhala in a European magazine and one of their comments was "we love their music, but we never get to experience who they are as people." That really stuck with me. At the end of the day, Buddhism is not about statues, it's not about beads, it's not about clothes and it's not about monks per se. It's basically about a way of living that keeps you aware of what's happening in your mind and what's happening in your body. Then it asks you to make decisions based on that awareness. You know what I'm saying? You see what state of mind you have, you see how your body is feeling right now...how are you gonna act based on that? It's like a moment by moment analysis of who you are and what you do. So yes, there are guidelines and stuff like that but there's no like, 10 Commandments. It's basically, try your best not to do any harm to yourself and others, and try to be aware of yourself from moment to moment. Also, letting yourself reveal itself to yourself and see where you find yourself [laughs]. But as long as you're living, you're gonna get your feet dirty and we're in the rap game...this is the music industry, there's almost no way of not getting your feet dirty in this. Through meditation I'm learning to balance getting my feet dirty enough to keep walking, without falling all the way in the mud. For me, what I'm concerned with is being a full human. The full expression of being a human. If you don't know what you are, how can you transcend it? So, I want to have my champagne, and I want to have my Porsche, and I want to have my Lamborghini, I want to wear my Heyday Footwear and I want to wear my Kennett Watches. I want all of those things. But, when I'm in my Lamborghini, I want to make a pit stop to the local food bank and make a donation. When I'm in my Porsche, I want to stop by a homeless shelter to drop off some clothes. If I get \$100k for some show, I want to break off half of that to some foundation to help end hunger or provide clean water to people in need. I want to be wealthy so I can be a service to others. That's what Jay-Z said, "I can't help the poor if I'm one of them." So to me, it's the pursuit of righteous wealth, and sometimes it's not righteous how you come up on it, but it's what you do with it when you get it that matters, ultimately. So you'll hear that spirituality in my music, but you'll also hear wreckless materialism and that's a good snapshot of where my mind and life is right now. I have a yearning towards the good, but I also have the yearning for the basic things that most humans want. I just try to do it with awareness and keep it balanced."*

An article in the March 2011 edition of the Shambhala Sun Magazine contained an interview with The Rza leader of the world famous rap group Wu-Tang Clan and himself highly influenced by Buddhist thought, here is an excerpt regarding his lyrical content:

***Shambhala Sun:****Buddhism tries to emphasize right speech, so some Buddhists have a hard time with the cursing in rap. Can you explain why you're not afraid of using explicit language?*

***The Rza:****In one of the books I have on Buddhism, a student is talking to the master. The student is saying things like fart and shit, and the master condemns him for it. But later on, the master finds himself describing something and in no other way could he describe it besides using foul words. Therefore, he got into the*

*position of the student. Also, there is a story about Da Mo when he first went to Shaolin. He was meditating when a monk walked by, saw mud, and said, "Don't let the mud get on you. It's dirty and will defile you." But then Da Mo said, "Yeah, but the lotus plants grow out of the mud. So, if mud can produce something so beautiful, how can it be foul?" Curse words can be considered dirt. If the word gets the message through, then it's not a negative word. Making the point clearer is what words are for.*

The ideas and arguments expressed in the above lead us back to the question of whether the Buddhist artist can produce work that is on the surface antithetical to Buddhist ethical thought yet is counter-intuitively intended to bring the uninitiated (and the experienced) listener to the very same principles that his or her work appears to defy. It is my belief that this is possible. Jet Li's films, especially "Hero" and "Danny the Dog" and several others, all depict violence, which violates the first of Buddha's five precepts. Yet, Li's films (more recently since he became a Tibetan Buddhist) have been designed to demonstrate that despite the central character's violent circumstances, it the protagonists inner conflict that is far more important and far more impactful than any physical enemy he can subdue, leading the viewer to understand what the Buddha espoused in the Dhammapada: "Better than conquering a thousand enemies is he who conquers himself". An interview with Asian Bite sums up Li's secret agenda in his otherwise violent films:

*Of his films, Li considers the most important to be Hero, Fearless and 2005's Danny the Dog, in which he plays a senseless brute, trained to savage anyone running foul of his loan-shark master. "Everything I want to say is in those three movies," he declares. "The message of Hero is that your personal suffering is not as important as the suffering of your country. The point of Danny the Dog is that violence is not a solution. Fearless is actually about personal growth — about a guy who decides that in the end his greatest enemy is himself."*

More than the message in his movies however is Li's real-life ability to use the wealth garnered from his seemingly negative (violent) history of filmmaking into tangible philanthropic efforts.

*[T]he One Foundation is Li's contribution toward that balance, and for its sake he has taken time out from films, becoming a full-time relief worker and traveling tirelessly on foundation business. This month he is set to appear at a Clinton Global Initiative meeting in Hong Kong. "Philanthropy is my passion and my life now," he says. "I wake up and eat and I'm thinking about it. I'm still thinking in the bath. I talk to everyone I can." It is difficult to name any other A-list celebrity, not even Bono, who has made such a total commitment – Asian Bite.*

Whether by use of clandestine Dharma themes shrouded in samsaric excess and profanity, or by applying the wealth gained from creating art that speaks to the material and sensual desires of the audience, to promote the *Sila, Samadhi and Prajna* of the Buddha, I believe that the 21<sup>st</sup> Century artist devoted to Dharma must adopt what some might call a tantric approach to art. I use the term loosely here in order to highlight specifically Buddshit tantra's emphasis of using all of the energies in the mind, negative and positive to gain awareness towards enlightenment.

In vipassana meditation we are trained to watch the mind unflinchingly, like the bare attention prescribed in Zen practice. In following the *Satipatthana* method of

meditation, we do not attempt to pretend or change what is in our minds and bodies, we simply observe the reality of what is inside us and derive insight into the impermanence, suffering and non-self nature of whatever it is we observe. The artist's mediation is his or her art and the object of that meditation is the world outside and within the artist. As Buddhist artists we seek to honestly relate our experiences and observations regardless of if what we examine or express is pretty. We are showing the extreme nature of the world of desire and in all honesty our degrees of attraction to that world as we are unenlightened beings. Not only this, we are expressing our desire to ultimately be free from samsara, even if we only have the vantage point of being knee-deep within it. Also, we may strategically use the culture of sex, drugs and violence that so enthralls the world, as a bait to the audience in order to gain trust, only to ultimately guide them to a place of deeper understanding about the world, its pitfalls and liberation through sense awareness. I liken this use of *upaya* to the Parable of the Burning House as told in the Lotus Sutra and as related and explained by the website of the American Zen Buddhist Temple:

*In a village, there was a Grhapati. He was old and very rich. He had lots of lands, houses, and servants. This Grhapati's house was huge. The main house was old, the walls were fallen in ruins, the pillar roots were rotten, and the beam of the house was crooked.*

*Suddenly, the house was on fire. The Grhapati's sons were in this house. The Grhapati was horrified when he saw fire burning the house. He thought, although he can safely escape from the door, but his sons were happily playing inside of the house. They did not aware that the house was on fire. Then he thought, there was only one door in this house, and that door was small and narrow. His sons were too young to aware that the house was on fire, they were long for what they were playing, and they could be burn by the fire. He should tell them that this house was on fire, all of them should leave the house right away. Do not let the fire taking their lives. So the Grhapati told his sons about this immediately. Although the father told his sons that the house was on fire, but his sons just glance at him then they went back to play again. They did not believe and did not want to accept the truth. They did not know what the fire would do to the house.*

*Meanwhile, the Grhapati thought, this house was burning by the fire, if his sons and himself did not get out of here in time, they all be killed by the fire. He had to think of a way to prevent the fire taking his sons' lives. The father knew that his sons like various kinds of rare and precious toys, so he told his sons that, there were rare and precious toys outside of the house, if they did not go out to get the toys, they all be regretted for that. And he promised to give his sons whatever they want. The sons all rushed out of the house once they heard what their father said. The Grhapati's mind was full of peace and joy after he saw all of his sons leaving the burning house safe and sound. They all set down on a lot outside of the house. Then the sons asked their father to give them the rare and precious toys that he promised them. The Grhapati generously gave each son a rare and precious great ox cart.*

*The Buddha is like this Grhapati, he is the father of all sentient beings. He sees that all the sentient beings are living in the burning house of the triple world. They are burning by the fire of birth, old, sick, death, worry, ignorance,*

*and three poisons; and are having various kinds of sufferings caused by the five desires arising from the objects of the five senses and greed. They then suffer in the hell, animal, and hungry ghost realms. Or they are rebirth in the heaven as gods or goddesses, or in the human realm. All the sentient beings are neither aware nor horrified by these sufferings: the suffering in poverty, the suffering of being separated from those whom one loves, and the suffering of having to meet the hateful. They enjoy and sink in these sufferings, and they do not generate the mind of weary of the world and want to abandon it. They do not want to liberate from karma and from those sufferings. The sentient beings reside in this burning house of the triple world, are running from the east to the west and from the west to the east. Even though they are in great suffering, they do not troubled by these sufferings. When Buddha sees this, he thought, he is the father of all sentient beings, he should pull those sufferings out of the sentient beings, and give them the joy of the Buddha-wisdom.*

*In order to save and set free all sentient beings, Buddha uses skillful and appropriate methods to deliver all the sentient beings to apart from the sufferings and to gain happiness and great wisdom.*

There are many who, in taking the work of modern Buddhist artists at face value, may disagree with our content and approach. However, if they analyze our work from the perspective of skillful means, it is my hope that they will see that not only is our art viable under the scrutiny of Buddhist principles, but very likely, what we produce on the frontlines of popular art may be the only way the world at large comes in contact with core Buddhist principles in a compelling, attractive way, enough to perhaps make them take a closer, deeper look at their lives. Not unlike our mothers, who hid medicine in sweet foods to help us when we were sick.

May all beings be well, happy and peaceful.