

# **Music Therapy Today**

## **WFMT online journal**

**Volume 15, No. 1**



### **SPECIAL EDITION: MUSIC THERAPY & TRAUMA**

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### Suggested Citation of this Publication

Author A. A., Author B, B., & Author C. C. (2019). Title of article. Music Therapy Today 15(1), pp-pp. Retrieved from <http://musictherapytoday.wfmt.info>



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World Federation of Music Therapy (WFMT)  
[www.wfmt.info](http://www.wfmt.info)

Music Therapy Today  
ISSN 1610-191X



# Music Interventions for Integrating Loss Based on Buddhist Psychology Practice

## Reviewer

**Puchong Chimpiboon, M.A. (music).** Music Therapy Major  
Academic Occupational Therapist, Siriraj Palliative Care Center,  
Faculty of Medicine, Siriraj Hospital, Mahidol University, Thailand  
Email: puchongmsmu@gmail.com

**Dr. Pornpan Kaenampornpan.** Lecturer  
Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, Khon Kaen University  
Email: pornpan@kku.ac.th

**Assoc. Prof. Dr. Dena Register, MT-BC.**  
Director of Music Therapy Program,  
School of Music, West Virginia University  
Email: Dena.Register@mail.wvu.edu

## Abstract

While music is not a universal language, it is a universal force in helping people of various social, cultural, and spiritual backgrounds to connect with others; to cope with the various challenges that life brings; and to communicate both what they are experiencing and how they perceive the world around them. To that end, music plays an integral role in helping individuals cope with grief and loss, and in developing an individual's sense and understanding of spirituality. Because there is very little information regarding how music therapy and Buddhist Psychology may overlap, the purpose of this review article is to identify how music interventions for integrating loss can be incorporated into Buddhist Psychology Practice in order to better understand the role that music therapy plays in the primarily Buddhist, Thai society. Studies from both electronic databases and electronic journals were collected for analysis. This article presents music listening and songwriting as music interventions which can help grieving people to integrate loss in a manner similar to Buddhist Psychology Activities. Music listening can combine with mindfulness practice, and it is beneficial in reducing depression and empowering participants to meditate. Songwriting is less confronting than speaking when dealing with a difficult topic. Thus, the use of music is recommended to facilitate the expression of the emotions, feelings, thoughts, and memories associated with loved ones.

**Keywords:** music interventions, integrating loss, Buddhist psychology practice

## Resumen

*Aunque la música no es un lenguaje universal, es una fuerza universal que ayuda a personas de varias clases sociales, culturales y espirituales a conectar con los demás; a afrontar los distintos de-*

safios que brinda la vida; y a comunicar lo que han experimentado y como perciben el mundo que les rodea. Con este objetivo, la música juega un papel integral en ayudar a los individuos a afrontar dolor y pérdida, y en desarrollar la personalidad individual y la comprensión de la espiritualidad. Debido a que existe muy poca información relativa a la relación entre la musicoterapia y la Psicología Budista, el objetivo de este artículo de revisión es identificar como las intervenciones musicales para soportar las pérdidas pueden incorporarse a la práctica de la Psicología Budista, para comprender mejor el papel que la musicoterapia juega en una sociedad principalmente Budista de la sociedad Thai. Se han recogido estudios para su análisis tanto de las bases de datos electrónicas como de las publicaciones electrónicas. Este estudio presenta las audiciones musicales y la composición de canciones como intervenciones musicales que pueden ayudar a las personas a procesar un duelo y a aceptar su pérdida en una forma similar a la actividad psicológica del Budismo. La audición musical puede combinarse con la práctica de la atención plena (mindfulness), lo que es beneficioso para reducir la depresión e inducir a los participantes a la meditación. La composición de canciones significa menor confrontación que la palabra cuando se trata de un tema difícil. Así, el uso de la música se recomienda para facilitar la expresión de las emociones, sentimientos, pensamientos y recuerdos asociados con las personas queridas.

**Palabras clave:** intervenciones musicales, aceptación de pérdidas, práctica psicológica Budista.

## Introduction

Grief is defined as the normal reaction of loss, which all human beings must face. It includes many aspects, such as psychological, social, behavioral, and cognitive responses, based on an individual's perceptions (Rando, 1984; Worden, 2002). There are two types of loss people experience: physical and symbolic. Physical loss is tangible, such as the loss of a loved one or personal possessions, while symbolic loss is more abstract and can include a loss of status, social role, or identity (Scrutton, 1995). Both physical and symbolic losses can prompt grief in an individual.

Parkes (1965) divided grief into four phases. These comprised (1) numbness, whereby a person is stunned and appears non-reactive when faced with a loss; (2) yearning and searching, which may present manifestations such as anger, restlessness, irritability, disbelief, tension, and tearfulness; (3) disorganization and despair, whereby a person appears

to have given up the attempt to recover and accept loss; and (4) reorganization, when the individual detaches from the loss, starts to initiate new relationships, and displays renewed interest in life (Parkes, 1965).

Grief is a vital process for helping people accept loss and move forward with their lives (Rando, 1984). Previous studies have demonstrated the benefits of using interventions to help people integrating grief and loss. Cognitive-behavioral therapy and counseling have been used to reduce symptoms of prolonged grief disorder (PGD) in children (Spuij et al., 2013). For example, the "Growing through Loss" program was developed for adolescents who had multiple losses. This program focused on the value of support, education, and therapeutic groups for grieving adolescents. When established, it started by determining goals, objectives, and session activities. There were twelve sessions, covering the topics of antisocial attitudes, values, and beliefs; interpersonal skills; the dangers of alcohol and drugs; and

dealing with adverse families. Examples of the session exercises were role playing and handson activities. The results indicated that the program addressed the core issues of grief rather than just treating the symptoms of destructive behaviors (Walker and Shaffer, 2007).

Another approach combined parental counseling with the cognitive-behavioral treatment of prolonged grief in children and adolescents. This method provided substantial improvements in self-rated prolonged grief disorder and post-traumatic grief, while smaller changes were found in depression and parent-rated internalization and externalization (Spuij et al., 2013). Moreover, this cognitive behavioral therapy also assisted the elderly in confronting emotional drain and grief acceptance, and increased their spiritual well-being and emotional intelligence (Khashab, Kivi, and Fathi, 2017).

A systematic review of complicated grief therapy (also known as traumatic grief therapy) found that interpersonal therapy and cognitive-behavioral therapy have been used for the treatment of complicated grief (Enez, 2017). In terms of interventions, the review indicated that various psychotherapy-based interventions were able to be applied, such as supportive counseling, writing therapy, group therapy, and narrative intervention. Additionally, it has been reported elsewhere that creative arts therapy (or the therapy of art) was able to help with self-expression by providing a safe space, and psychodrama assisted in resolving personal issues and encouraging individuals to move forward with their lives (Count, 2000; Dayton, 2005).

In addition to the aforementioned interventions, a study by Phra Panot Gunavaddho (Isarasakul) (2011) described how Buddhist Psychology Practice formed part of an inter-

vention to help integrate loss. The hybrid-program combined Buddhist teaching and Buddhist-psychological group counseling, and it was based on the concepts of the Four Noble Truths and Threefold Training. The program provided four days for bereaved people to participate in Buddhist Psychological Practice, such as chanting, discussing doctrine, meditation, Buddhist counseling, and the pouring of water of dedication. The grief scales of the 19 participants in the program demonstrated a significant decrease in negative behaviors in the post-test and two-week follow-up test.

The Buddha's teaching states that, "In order to build a pure land, the Bodhisattvas make use of beautiful music to soften people's hearts, as with their hearts softened, people's minds are more receptive, and thus easier to educate and transform through the teaching". This indicates the reason for developing music as one type of ceremonial offering to be made to the Buddha (Misra and Shastri, 2014).

Buddhist music can be described as being relaxing and having an easy pace. It has a soft tone and a dignified, solemn manner. Listening to Buddhist music may reduce bodily fatigue, confusion, forgetfulness, and mental weariness, and may promote personal expression and communication (rumination of music). It also provides space to express the deepest feelings of the human soul through sincere chants of praise (Xingyun, Bell, and Miao, 2001).

Many music-therapy research studies have reported on the benefits of music interventions, especially for bereaved people. For example, creating original songs through songwriting assists patients and family members in understanding the experience of terminal illness, death, and loss (Heath and Lings, 2012). Moreover, the use of precomposed songs, music listening, and lyrical analysis provides

space for bereaved people to express their feelings of grief and loss (Magill, 2009), while group music therapy creates opportunities for participants to be joyful and express their grief alongside other group members (McFerran, 2010). In addition, the use of Orff-based music therapy interventions significantly reduces behavioral problems and grief symptoms (Hilliard, 2007), and music-therapy-based bereavement groups experience reduced grief symptoms (Hilliard, 2001).

These studies indicate that music interventions help grieving people to integrate loss in a manner similar to Buddhist Psychology Practice. Therefore, it may be valuable to integrate these two interventions and measure outcomes in order to further the evidence-based practice of music therapy techniques coupled with Buddhist Psychology Practice. This could also help develop guidelines for the use of music interventions in Buddhist Psychology Practice for the integration of loss (Walker and Shaffer, 2007).

### Understanding Buddhist Psychology Practice

Buddhist Psychology Practice for integrating loss are based on the application of Buddhist principles and the underpinnings of Buddhist Psychology. The Buddhist principles consist of the Four Noble Truths and the Threefold Training (Gunavaddho, 2011).

The Four Noble Truths are the four main truths which are derived from Lord Buddha enlightenment. These lessons aim to free people from suffering (Tsering, 2005). The first is the truth of suffering (*dukkha*), which acknowledges the existence of suffering in life. Birth, aging, illness, and death are all suffering. Feelings such as grief, anger, jealousy, anxiety, and disappointment are also expres-

sions of suffering. Separation from loved ones, enmity, and avidity are other forms of suffering. The second of the four truths relates to the cause of suffering (*samudaya*). All suffering does not happen by itself; there must be a reason why the suffering occurs, such as sensual desire, craving for existence, or craving for self-annihilation. The third truth relates to the end of suffering (*nirhodha*); it means that an individual has come to understand the concept that if suffering has occurred, it can disappear. The fourth truth is concerned with the path, or the way, to free a person from suffering (*magga*).

The way to end the suffering is known as the "Noble Eightfold Path". It consists of (1) right understanding; (2) right thought, which means having the intention or commitment to cultivate the right attitudes; (3) right speech, in order to speak truthfully and avoid slander, gossip, and abusive speech; (4) right action, in order to behave peacefully and refrain from stealing and killing; (5) right livelihood, so that one can live properly and not harm oneself or others; and (6) right effort, to achieve a positive attitude in a balanced way. A metaphorical example of this is the strings of a musical instrument and the amount of effort put upon them; they should not be too tense, nor too slack. Next is (7), right mindfulness, which means to be aware of the moment and to be focused in that moment; and lastly (8), right concentration, which is to train one's mind to become totally focused (Tsering, 2005).

*Threefold Training*, another principle underlying Buddhist Psychology Practice, consists of morality, concentration, and wisdom. Morality relates to the practice of developing the right speech, right action, and right livelihood. Concentration means to develop consciousness, or the mind, in order to achieve the right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentra-



tion. The third relates to wisdom, which is to train to develop the right understanding and the right thought through concentration (Olsen and Braseth, 2015; Thera, 2010).

### Activities in Buddhist Psychology

The Activities in Buddhist Psychology consist of the use of Buddhist precepts, chanting, meditation, discussions of the Doctrine, the pouring of water of dedication, and Buddhist counseling. Buddhist Psychology Practice requires 15 to 20 participants to stay at a peaceful place for four days and three nights. Each day starts with chanting, meditation, discussion, and counseling (Gunavaddho, 2011). The schedule of the Buddhist Psychology Practice is illustrated in the following table.

### Music Interventions in Buddhist Psychology Practice

One precept in Buddhism suggests that Buddhists should refrain from dancing, singing, and listening to music; going to see entertainment; wearing garlands; using perfume; and beautifying the body with cosmetics. However, the precepts in Buddhism are not commandments; rather, they are moral guidelines

to follow so that one may maintain healthy practices for oneself and not harm others. Given that, music interventions are applied to those Buddhist Psychology Practices which aim to help people who have experienced a loss. There have been many studies on the use of music therapy for people who have experienced a loss, and some have provided details of music interventions that can be applied to Buddhist Psychology Practice.

The application of music interventions within Buddhist Psychology Practice does not mean that the interventions will replace or disturb any process in the activities. Instead, the authors aim to use the music interventions as a tool to deliver the principles of both the Four Noble Truths and Threefold Training to clients. Based on their literature review, the authors recommend that music listening and songwriting can be readily applied to the schedule of Buddhist Psychology Practice.

### Music Listening

Mindfulness is an important element in Buddhist lessons. It helps people to focus on the here and now (Lesiuk, 2008; Lesiuk, 2016). People who experience loss may find it ex-

TABLE 1. *Schedule of Buddhist Psychology Practice*

Day	Early Morning 5 am	Late Morning 9 am	Afternoon 1 pm	Evening 6 pm
1		Greeting	Discussed Doctrine (Merit) Buddhist counseling	Discussed Doctrine (Kindliness & Love)
2	Chanting	Meditation	Discussed Doctrine (Belief in birth)	Buddhist counseling (the suffering)
3	Chanting	Buddhist counseling (Cause of suffering)	Discussed Doctrine (Karma)	Buddhist counseling (the end of suffering)
4	Chanting	Pouring water of dedication		

tremely hard to be fully in the present as thinking of the past is probably the only way to remind them of the loved ones they have lost. When people concentrate on the past or the future, it can lead to feelings of anxiety and depression. Various studies have demonstrated the positive effects of music listening on alleviating mood. For instance, Echardt and Dinsmore (2012) conducted a study combining mindfulness practice and music listening to treat depression. The results showed that this combination can be helpful for depression, and the participants felt it was a nonthreatening approach. Moreover, the technique encouraged the clients to choose music that expressed their feelings, which in turn allowed them to be able to understand their feelings. In addition, there is extensive literature regarding music and concentration. Listening to music mindfully can increase a listener's engagement (Diaz, 2011). Music listening can also be used as a "highly convenient, effective, and tolerable means of achieving the goal of more mindful functioning" (Graham, 2010). Therefore, during Buddhist Psychology Practice, listening to music can be very beneficial to empowering participants to do meditation.

### ***Songwriting***

In the healing process, songwriting is a useful music intervention to facilitate the expression of emotions, feelings, thoughts, and memories regarding loved ones, and to help patients and family members understand the experiences of terminal illness, death, and loss (McFerran-Skewes, 2000; Roberts, 2006; Heath and Lings, 2012; Clements-Cortés, 2004). When communicating about a difficult topic such as death, songwriting is less confronting than speaking (Derrington, 2005). Moreover, the lyrics from songwriting can represent coping strategies. The study by Dal-

ton and Krout (2006) reported that understanding, feeling, remembering, integrating, and growing were the coping strategies of bereaved adolescents, which were identified through an analysis of songwriting.

Many studies have demonstrated the process of using songwriting. As an example, the study by Roberts and McFerran (2013) represented the seven-steps of songwriting as (1) introducing songwriting; (2) brainstorming ideas for the song; (3) determining the song structure; (4) lyrical composition; (5) musical-accompaniment composition; (6) finalizing the musical features and recording the song; and (7) making covers for the CD and song-lyrics folder.

Additionally, by using a familiar melody in order to write new lyrics, it is possible to express emotions and memories relating to loved ones. This process requires that (1) the song is currently popular (as in presently played on the radio) or was popular within the past year; (2) the lyrics of the song either relate to bereavement or are easily modified for the bereavement setting; (3) the melodies are easy to sing and/or learn with few skips; and (4) the song has predictable, rhythmic timing (Fiore, 2016). After the songwriting is completed, a music therapist provides the opportunity for participants to share their memories and thoughts about their songs and their loved ones.

### **Conclusions**

While there are currently no published articles that discuss the specific use of music therapy techniques with Buddhist Psychology Practice, some music interventions can be applied within Buddhist Psychology Practice. These music intervention activities should be used as a tool to deliver the principles of the Four Noble Truths and Threefold Training.

This article presents music listening and song-writing as music interventions which can help grieving people to integrate loss in a manner similar to Buddhist Psychology Practice. Music listening combined with mindfulness practice shows benefits in terms of reducing depression and encouraging the expressing and understanding of feelings. Songwriting is less confronting than speaking when dealing with a difficult topic. Thus, the use of music is recommended to facilitate the expression of the emotions, feelings, thoughts, and memories related to the loved ones, and to assist patients and family members in understanding the experiences of terminal illness, death, and loss.

#### Acknowledgments

The authors are grateful to Phra Panot Gunavaddho (Isarasakul), who devised and refined the Buddhist Psychology Practice to help integrate loss. Moreover, we thank Assistant Professor Givivann Veerakul MD for her awareness of the importance of employing various interventions, including music therapy, to cope with loss and grief. She also introduced the authors to Buddhist Psychology Practices and encouraged us to develop and incorporate music interventions for integrating loss into Buddhist Psychology Practice.

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#### About the Author

##### **Puchong Chimpiboon**

Puchong Chimpiboon, MA, Music Therapy Major is a music therapist from Siriraj Palliative Care Center, Faculty of Medicine Siriraj Hospital, Mahidol University - Thailand. He is the assembly student delegate from South East Asia in 2014.



#### About the Author

##### **Pornpan Kaenampornpan**

Pornpan Kaenampornpan is currently working as a lecturer at the Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts, Khon kaen University – Thailand. She finished her Master Degree in music therapy from new Zealand School of Music and completed her PhD in music therapy at Anglia Ruskin University-England. Her clinical experience includes elderly, patients with dementia and children with special needs and their family.



### About the Author

#### Dena Register

Dena Register is an associate professor of music therapy and consultant to Mahidol University College of Music in Bangkok, Thailand. She helped establish clinical music therapy programs and the first graduate music therapy degree program in Southeast Asia.