

Article: The Healing Sutra music of Myōra

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Combine folk music, Western choir singing and classical music with Japanese spiritual texts and you get the music of Myōra, the artist-name of Zen monk Tamara Myoho Gabrysch. "Your samadhi changes what you play and how."

Myōra's first album, released just before the summer [of 2024*], contains five sutras and Buddhist texts set to music. In fact, it owes its existence to the abbot of Kirigaya-ji temple in Tokyo, the venerable Kuroda Roshi, and his love of karaoke. After years of intensive Zen study in the US with little time for music, Tamara Gabrysch and her husband Anton Coppens ended up with him in Japan for the final phase of their training.

"Kuroda Roshi loved going to karaoke bars and we went with him. I suddenly had to practice ABBA and The Carpenters in addition to my Zen practice." The guitar came out and she cautiously started playing again.

Returning to the Netherlands, Coppens and Gabrysch founded Zen River Temple in Uithuizen. Under the names Tenkei and Myoho, they have led a changing group of guests and a core group of ten to fifteen monks who have been living and training in the monastery for several years or longer. For the opening, they naturally invited Kuroda Roshi. A karaoke evening was part of the festivities. And the guitar was officially back in Gabrysch's life.

From ABBA to the Heart Sutra with guitar and accordion accompaniment: that's quite a step. How did that go?

"I was a professional musician before I started my Zen practice. But I never really wrote songs. I loved singing and harmony and had made quite a few riffs that I was happy with. I just hated writing lyrics. Wouldn't it be an idea to use existing lyrics? For example, the sutras? Or would that be sacrilegious? I hesitated, but around that time someone in Japan became famous with a recording of the Heart Sutra. Then I thought, oh if someone from Japan does it, I can do it too! That's how the songs came about. Sometimes I had a text that I set to music. Another time, I had a riff, I sang some sounds myself, then found a dharani, or a Buddhist text, that fitted it."

Has it always been a wish to release an album?

"No, that has grown. Within Zen River, we added music and art as a sixth training element to the five we already had (meditation, ritual, text study, manners and physical health, etc.) a few years ago. We sing the Heart Sutra every day with music. One of our members plays the violin. Tenkei plays the accordion. As a tenzo, I am usually working in the kitchen, but when I have time, I sneak out to play along on the guitar.

I knew a music producer from our time at the Kanzeon Center (in Salt Lake City), Brad Ryudo Stock, and he wanted to hear my songs. And then he offered to produce them! At the same time, I heard from friends who listened to the songs that they had benefited so much from them. Then we started working on them. First, I record the guitar, then the voices are added layer by layer. I sing everything myself and come up with the harmonies on the spot."

How do you combine making music with your practice? Isn't it something you should let go of as a Zen monk?

"I think there is a stage in your development where you really need to focus on your practice. My husband and I went to the US and Japan for ten years to train, and I was not really into music. And when the music came back, it came back in a different way. Your samadhi changes what you play and how you play it. I am more intimately involved with what I play. I play more from within, as it were, and the samadhi I have developed shines through in my musical ideas and inspiration."

You describe the music as healing. What exactly do you mean by that?

"Someone once told me that a cat that purrs 'heals' itself; it brings itself into a calmer state by purring. According to the ancient Indians, dharanis work just like that purring cat. It is not about the meaning but about the sounds. Think of the Ohm sound from yoga. By letting certain sounds resonate in our bodies, we feel calmer and more peaceful.

Is that healing? I don't know, but calming ourselves down is a great idea for most of us! There is a whole branch of Zen, called bompū Zen, whose sole purpose is to help us feel a little better. I know people who use my music when their heads are too full to meditate. That is excellent as far as I am concerned."

And on a deeper level?

"I have also had some special experiences with this music. I recorded the music in the Netherlands and sent it to Brad, who then sent back edited versions. One day I lay down to rest. At the same time, I listened to the newly edited recording of the Daishin Dharani. This is a call for protection that is used in Japan at memorial services. As I listened, a strong emotion came over me. I couldn't place it at first until I realized: that's how I felt when I said goodbye to my sister. When she was 15 and I was 18, she had an accident and died. The music brought out those feelings.

We also made a recording of the Jizo Shingon-dharani. Our version starts with the tinkling sound of bells, a bit childlike. In Japanese Buddhism, Jizo is the protector of unborn children, who need assistance to get from this world to the next. Japanese women who have had a miscarriage hold a service where they call upon Jizo. I can imagine that that is comforting; that it gives you the feeling that you were able to do something for your unborn child after all. A friend who had listened to it wrote to me. She had lost several children through miscarriages. The music helped her to process her grief."

How does what you do fit within the Soto Zen tradition that you are part of? You already said that music is an element of training in Zen River, but in Japan, it is not. Traditionally, people sing those sutras very monotonously.

"That is correct, sutra singing in this way does not exist in Japan. But practising Zen as we do in Zen River does not exist in Japan either! We seem very traditional here, with a monastery, and services, and monk's robes. But what we do is unique. In Japan, there are family temples, where a married priest lives with his family, and where you can go for memorial services. And you have training temples, where people live for a few years, but certainly not ten or twenty years, like here. We are pioneers.

In Japan, the focus of sutra singing is on the text, the concentration. Everyone sings on their own keynote and how it sounds together is not so important. When Zen came to the West, we made it so that we had to sing monotonously: all on the same key. But that is not traditional. That is why we feel free to take the next step and add music. The reactions from the Soto school and the White Plum lineage, which we are part of, have been good. They also asked to use the music."

The last song on the album really stands out. What is the story behind it?

The text comes from another tradition, from Mahayana Buddhism. It is part of the Lankavatara Mahayana sutra. 'If someone is struck by disaster, repeat these sounds 108 times and the evil will rush in the other direction, crying and wailing.' A kind of magic spell, then, with all sorts of crazy sounds: tutte tutte vutte vutte patte patte katte katte amale amale vimale vimale... The music we made for it is very cheerful, sunny, a bit Bollywood. Does such a spell work? I think: if you have a positive attitude, that will drive away a lot of evil.

My musical journey, under the artist name Myōra, combines folk music, Western choir singing, and classical music with Japanese spiritual texts. As Zen monk, I love to create music that is deeply influenced by my spiritual practice.

I have to thank Rev. Junyu Kuroda, the late abbot of Kirigaya-ji temple in Tokyo, who had a love of karaoke. After spending years in intensive Zen study in the U.S. with limited time for music, I, together with my husband Anton Coppens, lived at his temple in Japan for the final phase of our training. Kuroda Roshi loved going to karaoke bars, and so I found myself singing ABBA and The Carpenters alongside Zen practice.

When we returned to the Netherlands, Tenkei and I founded Zen River Temple in Uithuizen. We lead a varied group of guests and a core group of ten to fifteen monks who have been living and training with us for several years. Naturally, we invited Kuroda Roshi for our opening, and we included a karaoke evening as part of the festivities. Not long after, I realized I could be my own karaoke machine, so I picked up my guitar again and began playing.

I had been a musician before my Zen practice but had never written songs. I always loved singing and harmony, creating various riffs, but writing lyrics was daunting. One day, I wondered if I could set existing lyrics to music, such as the sutras. Initially, I hesitated, thinking it might be sacrilegious. However, when someone in Japan gained fame for recording the Heart

Sutra, it inspired me. If they could do it, so could I! That's how my songs began to emerge. Sometimes, I'd set music to a text, while other times, I'd create a riff and seek a fitting dharani or Buddhist text.

To create the songs, I layer the recordings with guitar and then add vocals. I sing everything myself and create harmonies spontaneously. Friends who had listened to my music shared how much it helped them, which was inspiring to hear. Then later, a music producer I knew from our time at the Kanzeon Center, Brad Ryudo Stock, expressed interest in my songs and eventually offered to produce them, which resulted in our collaboration on the album ShoSaiMyo.

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I owe much to Rev. Junyu Kuroda, the late abbot of Kirigaya-ji temple, whose love for karaoke inspired me during my time training in Japan with my husband Anton Coppens. After establishing Zen River Temple in the Netherlands, I began to explore music more seriously, merging my previous musical experience with my spiritual practice.

Initially hesitant to write songs—concerned it might seem sacrilegious—I found inspiration when someone recorded the Heart Sutra. I began creating music by setting existing Buddhist texts to melodies or crafting riffs and then finding fitting dharanis. Layering guitar and vocals, I created spontaneous harmonies. Friends' feedback encouraged me, and music producer Brad Ryudo Stock later collaborated with me on the album ShoSaiMyo.

My thoughts on combining music and Zen practice evolved. After twelve years focused on training, music returned to me transformed, reflecting a deeper expressiveness. According to the ancient Indians, dharanis work just like that purring cat. It's not about the meaning but about the sounds. I often think of the Ohm sound from yoga. By letting certain sounds resonate in our bodies, we can feel calmer and more peaceful. Is that healing? I don't know, but calming ourselves down is a great idea for most of us! I know people who use my music when their heads are too full to meditate, and that's excellent as far as I'm concerned.

One standout song on the album, inspired by the Lankavatara Mahayana sutra, uses quirky sounds as a kind of magical spell. Its cheerful, Bollywood-inspired music reinforces my belief that maintaining a positive attitude can drive away negativity.

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*The complete album of ten songs, plus recent work, is now available through [BandCamp](#) and [SoundCloud](#). ShoSaiMyo and the acoustic version ShoSaiMyo: In One Breath is available on streaming services [Spotify](#), [Apple Music](#), and [YouTube](#). Several tracks are available on [Insight Timer](#).