

BUDDHIST LOVING-KINDNESS AND COMPASSION IN VIETNAMESE RAP MUSIC – THE CASE OF DEN VAU

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Abstract. Since its introduction to Vietnam, Buddhism has been deeply intertwined with local culture and influenced many aspects of Vietnamese spiritual life, including contemporary art such as rap music. However, to date, there have been few academic studies that provide important insights into contemporary Vietnamese rap as well as the influence of Buddhism on rap. This study examined the rap lyrics of Den Vau, one of the particularly famous rap artists in contemporary Vietnamese music. Seven rap songs were chosen alongside a descriptive, thematic analysis was conducted. Through qualitative content analysis, this study explores how Buddhist concepts of loving-kindness and compassion are embedded in Den Vau's rap lyrics. The analysis reveals two main themes: (1) loving-kindness, demonstrated through human relationships (including equal love for all people and filial piety to parents) and environmental consciousness; and (2) compassion, manifested in empathy for various groups (youth, parents, children, all beings) as well as self-compassion. While previous studies often associated rap music with harmful influences, this research indicates how rap can serve as a platform for conveying positive Buddhist values. By examining Den Vau's rap lyrics, the study illuminates the unique fusion of Buddhist philosophy with contemporary rap artistry in the Vietnamese context, highlighting how global art forms can effectively transmit local values and positive messages.

Keywords: Buddhist values, loving-friendliness, compassion.

1. Introduction

Rap music, which started in the 1970s in the Bronx borough of New York City, has been perceived as originating in inner-city African-Americans' dreams, dilemmas, and desires. Since then, from Shanghai to Nairobi to Sao Paulo, hip-hop in general and rap music in particular has become popular and developed into a global art of communication [1], [2]. Rooted in the hip-hop culture and "is the musical form that emerged from this culture" [3], rap is one of the four major elements of hip-hop, including MC'ing or rapping, DJ'ing, B-boying or B-girling with breaking dance styles, and graffiti art or writing [4]. As suggested by Androutsopoulos (2009), we can view rap music as a combination of verbal art, visual representation, movement, and sound [5]. In addition, rap carries significant features of underground music. It goes beyond mainstream culture's boundaries and is formed by "creative works" that used to be perceived as being "unadulterated, free of formulaic composition, with a very hands-on and personal

process behind it, contrasting with the mainstream's heavy-handed production" [6]. Therefore, rap music should be taken seriously as a cultural and artistic movement that has influenced music culture worldwide [7] and also as a means of expressing rappers' egos directly through authentic lyrics [8].

In Vietnam, hip-hop and rap were influenced by North American rap culture through the young Vietnamese generations growing up and studying in the US and Canada. Khanh Nho is believed to have laid the first tile for Vietnamese rap music with a song called "Vietnamese Gang" recorded in 1997 in the city of Portland, Oregon USA [9]. For the first time in the history of Vietnamese music, a song was partially rapped in Vietnamese by a Vietnamese rapper, paving the way for Vietnamese rap culture for Vietnamese artists. However, between 1997 and 2002, Vietnamese rap emerged just outside of Vietnam and was mostly developed in the United States [10]. Fans of rap in Vietnam had to wait until 2002 to witness the birth of Da Rap Club which was established by a Vietnamese rapper called XLIM. Through the club, information relating to rap in the world was exchanged and provided, preparing for the first underground rappers such as Lil' Knight a.k.a. LK, and Fantasy XY a.k.a. D-Cash to appear in Vietnam [6]. Since then, rap was no longer strange to Vietnamese music fans, especially during the 2006-2008 period, as listeners increased in number and rap organizations were formed all over various parts of the country, but just in the underground communities [11].

The year 2020 marked a milestone for the underground community to go mainstream as two rap contests, namely Rap Viet and King of Rap, were aired on Vietnamese national TV during prime time. Both shows, with the former adapted from *The Rapper of Thailand* and the latter copyrighted from South Korea's *Show Me the Money*, have helped a number of Vietnamese underground rap artists achieve popularity in the mainstream music industry [12]. Almost all "big brothers" and "big sisters" in the Vietnamese rap culture joined these two shows as coaches and judges, including Wowy, Suboi, Karik, Binz, LK, Lil Shady, and Dat Maniac [6]. Especially, Rap Viet with its three first episodes became the most-viewed video on YouTube's live-streaming platform with the number of viewers reaching approximately half a million views [13].

Today, rap music is an inseparable part of Vietnam's music culture. Numerous young Vietnamese started as breakdancing practitioners, or b-boys/b-girls, back in 2007, then have evolved into rappers and producers. Such outstanding faces as Binz, JustaTee, BigDaddy, Suboi, Den Vau, ICD, and Cricket later became rap stars with independent music products and owned tens of millions of views on digital platforms [14]. In fact, rap has become a means for Vietnamese rappers to express themselves. Rappers rap about rebellion confronting existing customs or conventional ideas, which shows a sign of a society in transformation [15], [14]. Through rap, rap artists have tried to paint themselves to be young individuals having a strong desire to raise their voice, "talk about things and connect with friends" [14], as well as show their personalities, youthfulness, creativity, and bravery [6]. Thus, rap music has become a virtual site for Vietnamese rappers to reflect their lived experiences and cultural values, especially in today's digital era. Yet, studies on contemporary Vietnamese rap music, particularly those analyzing lyrical content and meaning, have been largely overlooked in academia.

To address this gap, this paper explores possible Buddhist values that may be reflected in rap music through the works of Den Vau, a prominent figure in the contemporary Vietnamese rap scene. Through thematic analysis of seven selected songs, the research examines potential Buddhist values and cultural elements that emerge in his lyrics. The findings aim to contribute to understanding how the rapper incorporates Vietnamese cultural elements and self-representation in his work, potentially offering new perspectives on the localization of rap music in Vietnamese society.

2. Content

2.1. The Philosophy of Loving-Kindness (Metta) and Compassion (Karuna) in Buddhism

Buddhism is a religion with a profound influence on the social life of Eastern people. Buddhism operates in life first of all as a religion expressing human beliefs in general and Eastern beliefs in particular. Besides, Buddhism is also an ideological doctrine whose quintessence is Buddhist ideology - a human-oriented ideology, aimed at explaining and solving human problems; a philosophical ideology about the laws of the universe, society, and history. Buddhism was introduced to Vietnam in the first and second centuries and became the national religion under the Ly and Tran dynasties in the 10th and 14th centuries. From the Le Dynasty to the Nguyen Dynasty (i.e. the 15th to 19th centuries), although it was no longer the national religion, Buddhism was still a religion with a strong foothold in Vietnamese social life and in Vietnamese people's thoughts [16].

In Buddhist philosophy, *loving-kindness* and *compassion* often go hand in hand. Along with *letting go*, *loving-kindness* and *compassion* are positive and beneficial thoughts that the Buddha encouraged each person to cultivate. According to [17], *compassion* and *loving-kindness* support and strengthen each other. When someone has a heart filled with boundless love, they will easily feel and understand the suffering of others deeply. From the Buddhist perspective, both *compassion* and *loving-kindness* are unlimited states of mind, meaning that this compassion extends infinitely and includes all living things and things.

2.1.1. Loving-Kindness (Metta)

Loving-kindness or *Metta* in Pali represents universal love extending to all beings, spreading across all species. Hopkins (2001) defines *loving-kindness* as boundless, selfless goodwill toward all beings [18]. This universal love motivates individuals to contribute to society, especially those below them; to assist those less fortunate such as the elderly, children, animals, and nature; and to avoid harming the lives of all living beings. Loving kindness manifests in speech, gestures, and actions, with its ultimate expression found in the act of generous giving. *Metta* stands as one of the four brahma viharas (sublime states, "immeasurables," or noble abodes), alongside *karuna* (compassion), *mutida* (empathetic joy), and *upekkha* (equanimity). Research suggests that developing these states cleanses the mind, shields it from negative outcomes, and fosters happiness [19].

2.1.2. Compassion (Karuna)

Compassion is when thinking about the suffering of others, one also feels sorrow. It is a spontaneous, wholesome reaction, accompanied by a wish to alleviate the suffering of others [17]. In other words, *compassion* can be understood as a deep concern for the suffering of all living beings, combined with the selfless desire to help others escape their suffering, even at great personal sacrifice. A compassionate heart first helps people empathize with their parents' sorrows for them, enables them to express words of love to their parents, and shows their love for them. In addition to one's parents, compassion also directs them to all other suffering sentient beings, those in need, poverty, old age, illness, loneliness - including their enemies, so that they can extend a helping hand [20]. Furthermore, compassionate actions are characterized by selfless giving without expectation of reciprocity. True compassion manifests through tolerance and equal treatment towards all beings.

2.2. The manifestation of Buddhist ideology in Den Vau's rap songs

2.2.1. Rap by Den Vau

Den Vau's real name is Nguyen Duc Cuong, born in 1989. He is one of the few Vietnamese rap artists who achieved success through indie/underground music - a style produced

independently from major record labels following DIY principles in recording and publishing [21]. As an independent artist, Den Vau has maintained creative control over his music production and distribution [22]. His lyrics often address social issues faced by young people such as the pressures of urban life, as demonstrated in songs like *This song is pretty chill* [23] and *The Sky Today Is Extremely Cloudy* [24]. This authentic approach to songwriting has helped Den Vau create a strong connection with listeners who see his music as a reflection of shared experiences and struggles.

Since 2014, Den Vau has composed and performed as lead singer on 21 singles and collaborated with different artists on 10 other songs. Almost all of Den Vau's rap songs are written in Vietnamese. Sometimes only a few words or phrases in English can be found in his lyrics. Famous rap songs by Den Vau include: *Take Each Other To Hide Away*, *Chasing the Sun's Shadows*, *Bring money home to mom*, *Ten Years*, *Cook for You*, etc. In 2023, with 16 hit music videos reaching the top spot on YouTube Vietnam's trending chart, rapper Den Vau holds the record for the most number-one trending videos among Vietnamese artists [25].

Through a variety of challenges and hardships, along with the Buddhist philosophy instilled in his mind and soul, Den Vau has developed a profound outlook on life. This is shown through his philosophical, gentle, and delicate compositions, creating a unique style in the Vietnamese rap industry. That difference probably comes from the convergence between Buddhism and art, between Buddhism and the artist's thinking. Buddhist philosophy deeply influences Den Vau's compassionate nature and shapes his artistic expression of everyday thoughts and emotions. It is Buddhist teachings that have enabled Den to infuse his rap songs with thoughtful insights about life and humanity.

2.2.2. Expressions of loving-kindness in Den Vau's rap songs

Den Vau's loving-kindness manifests through his genuine desire to help others and bring joy to all sentient beings. Stemming from his loving-kindness, Den Vau sincerely wants all sentient beings and all things to live in peace and happiness, regardless of whether they are relatives or strangers, parents or friends, children or adults, grass, trees, birds, or animals. His love seems to cover the whole world, which is equal, impartial, and pure. This spirit of loving-kindness inspires the rapper to contribute to society and support those in need.

Firstly, loving-kindness is manifested in actions between people, doing good deeds for people in Den Vau's rap lyrics:

*“...I cook for the children even though I'm not a great chef
It's also a way I help myself, to think less and ease my tired mind
I want to see these little guests finish all the delicious food
Because I know these children will build our homeland tomorrow
I cook for you children, so you'll have the strength to pick up each letter (each letter)”*

(translation from the song *Cook for You* [26]).

The lyrics of the song *Cook for You* share Den's journey to the highlands to visit the children “smiling coyly with round eyes” at Sa Tong ethnic minority boarding primary and secondary schools in Muong Cha district, Dien Bien province. The rap lyrics touch the hearts of listeners thanks to the humane message conveyed through Den Vau's meaningful actions in the midst of treacherous mountainsides. Not only showing thoughts of loving-kindness for the young children in mountainous regions who still struggle to secure food in the highlands, Den also acted strongly, dedicating his strength wholeheartedly with the desire to give as much as possible. He brings delicious meals to the children, helping them stay strong on their way to school, learn to read and train themselves to make a breakthrough for the future of building the country.

Secondly, loving-kindness is expressed through the portrayal of a child's fidelity towards their parents in Den Vau's lyrics. In particular, loving-kindness is present in a child's act of filial

piety to his mother and father: “*Bring money home to mom, don't bring her trouble*” in *Bring money home to mom*. The song's lyrics convey a message of gratitude and the desire of a child to repay the parents who gave birth to him. In this context, “money” here is not just property, not merely a measure of material wealth - it represents the fruit of a child's labor, a physical manifestation of his dedication to making his parents proud, an image of maturity of the child in his parent's eyes.

The act of “bringing money home to mother” symbolizes a child's journey to independence, personal growth, and ability to contribute not only to their family but to society as a whole. “Money” here is the result of the children's efforts, through which their parents can be somewhat assured that their children have been able to support themselves, have grown up, and are fully grown in life. While the act of “bringing money home to mother” is precious, what's even more valuable to a mother is her child's assurance that he earns this money honestly and ethically: “*The money I earn doesn't need to be laundered./ It only carries the scent of sweat./ Rest assured mother, I am a good citizen./ I pay my taxes regularly and fully./ ...The money I earn is honest money./ Using my strength and labor as my means.*” (in the song *Bring money home to mom* [27]).

Thirdly, loving-kindness is demonstrated through love for nature and the act of environmental protection. Den Vau expresses his loving-kindness through his constant efforts to protect the environment, nurturing green trees in the future:

*“Plant more trees, let's plant more trees - without forests where will music come from
Plant more trees, let's plant more trees - don't mind if our hands get dirty
Plant more trees, dear friend, join me in tilling soil and sowing seeds
So tomorrow the green forest will bring songs back to the woods...
Plant many seeds that sprout into green shoots
Making sky and earth vast with verdant hues...”*

(in the song *Music of the Forest* [28]).

The profound meaning alongside the message of environmental protection emanating from the song's lyrics is an inspiration for listeners to take action. Den Vau directs his loving-kindness and that of all the audience to the miserable situation of countless living beings in the jungle where trees are cut down, destroyed, and illegally exploited. “Plant more trees” is the artist's call to protect nature - a nationwide appeal to green the bare lands and hills across all provinces and cities. It is a call for individuals and families to join hands in building sustainable ecosystems throughout Vietnam, both for today and future generations. He believes that the act of planting a seed is a simple good deed that one does not need to be great to perform this small act and that by joining hands together, people can help nature revive, restore the forest's symphony of wildlife, and protect all living species and their natural habitats.

To sum up, Den Vau demonstrates loving-kindness through his generous care for his family, as well as for all living things in life. Den practices the philosophy of Buddhism's *metta* to the point that the artist's so-called “self” appears to have vanished. He sees himself assimilated with all sentient beings, therefore, there is no longer any difference between himself and others. All things have become a unified whole through the artist's truly tolerant, vast, and equal kindness.

2.2.3. Expressions of compassion in Den Vau's rap songs

To begin with, Den Vau demonstrates compassion for the youth's struggles. The rapper especially writes about young people's hardships, difficulties, and struggles in life. In his lyrics, listeners encounter the common suffering of humans, particularly, the youth. They attempt to make a living and deal with a variety of issues such as competition, jealousy, envy, stumbling, slander, defamation, and contempt in their life, “...They will exhaust you for every penny./ No matter what your Vietnamese zodiac is, they want to ride you./ Ride on your head and neck, even if you stick out your tongue and whine./ ...Try falling once, few people are willing to help you./

Most of them just laugh in your face, then, by the way, kick you down deeply” (translated from the song *One Million Likes* [29]).

Den Vau's rap songs paint a picture of young people's struggles in modern society, “You still lack sleep, when you have to meet deadlines?/ You forget to eat, forget to drink, forget to comb your hair.” alongside “coming home alone at night, I feel my heart is quiet” (translated from the song *This song is pretty chill* [30]). The lyrics resonate with listeners by capturing the exhaustion and isolation of urban life, where “even breathing feels like hard labor” (translated from the song *Let's Go Hide* [31]). Den also describes young people’s insecure, hectic life in the office *Going to the office early, going home late but the salary is still not enough* – translated from the song *This song is pretty chill* [30]). Additionally, Den sympathizes with the harshness of life facing the youngsters via the lyrics “people don't appreciate bees, they only treasure honey” (translated from the song *Two Million Years* [32]).

Furthermore, Den Vau shows compassion for his parents’ hardships. He writes about his empathy for the sacrifices and hardships facing his parents to provide for their children:

“Oh, those gray, windy days make my mother look so skinny.

Sometimes she faints in the middle of the street because she hasn't had enough food all day.

She doesn't dare to eat, doesn't dare to wear clothes, doesn't dare to spend money just because she's worried.”

(translated from the song *Bring money home to mom* [27]).

Den Vau deeply understands his parents’ devotion to bringing him up. Therefore, now that he is successful, he expresses his gratitude by buying his mother “a Dior bag”, shown in the line “Now I wear a tote bag to buy my mother a Dior bag” in *Bring money home to mom* [27]. This line clearly establishes Den Vau's recognition of his parents' sacrifices, in which “a Dior bag” is a meaningful image of gratitude. The artist shows how he acts on this understanding and recognizes it through a concrete example of buying an expensive gift for his mother to repay her for raising him. The contrast between “a tote bag” Den Vau wears and the luxury “a Dior bag” he buys for his mother symbolizes his journey from humble beginnings to success, and his desire to share that success with her.

Moreover, Den Vau shows compassion for the children. His deep sympathy for the highland children in Sa Tong ethnic schools is illustrated by a detailed description of their path to school in his lyrics of *Cook for You* [26]. The images of “winding tiny road”, “bumpy”, and “tough” demonstrate the challenging terrain that highland children must navigate daily to reach their schools - narrow mountain paths that wind around hills and mountains. These images effectively help listeners visualize the difficult physical conditions these students deal with in their pursuit of education. In other words, the rapper paints a realistic picture of the difficulties that the children in mountainous areas experience day by day. In particular, the image of “walking feet” evokes hardship but also shows the children's extraordinary determination in the journey to cultivate wisdom. Also, Den Vau expresses his concern about children losing their freedom to explore and play due to the destruction of the environment, loss of green space, and a forest of bare trees, “There are no trees anywhere to play for the children” (translated from the song *Music of the Forest* [28]).

Next, Den Vau conveys compassion for all sentient beings. The rapper's compassion is especially expressed through his worry and sadness when birds and animals are not able to fly or move freely in the majestic yet gentle space of the jungle and sing loudly in the harmony of nature. Consequently, Den's compassion enlightens listeners about all sentient beings’ suffering, from miserable animals that cannot live in the vast, spacious, and free nature, “Because animals cannot live in apartments” to delicate nature, cleared forests, and hostile environment, “Don't let the jungle become a thing of the past./ Don't let the forest's music stop playing one day./ Don't let

nature be just a memory left on Nat Geo./ The day trees disappear is the day humanity also disappears...” (translated from the song *Music of the Forest* [28]).

Den also shows deep concern about a future without forests. Through the lines “Don't let the jungle become a thing of the past” and “Don't let nature be just a memory left on Nat Geo”, the rapper expresses his pain and sadness when thinking about the prospect of the next generation only having known the forest through documentary films. Especially, the line “When trees disappear is the day humanity also disappears” conveys a profound awareness of the existential relationship between humans and nature and the rapper’s concern about the loss of forests in the future.

Finally, through a variety of song lyrics, Den Vau discusses compassion for himself. He describes how he has to reel under the pressures of the human world. That is the creative pressure to be a true artist, to create songs without calculation or profit. Den does not want to just follow popular tastes but live with artistic emotions. His desire is to compose simple and pure music, expressed through the lines:

*“There are so many artists like me in this world.
I don't want the pressure to be someone's idol.
Because that will turn me into someone else one day.
I can't live as myself, oh that it really hurts.
I hate being something so great.”*

(translated from the song *Don't call me an Idol* [33]).

Den Vau also emphasizes the moral and ethical pressures to keep himself upright and kind in the entertainment industry full of temptations and bribes, beyond the creative and commercial pressures, “And the numbers are so heavy that they can make us dizzy.../ But I can rest assured that I only sell my brainpower, but never sell myself”. Den's strong will to stay true to his artistic emotions may come from his very clear awareness that “And how much money is enough, who knows what the future holds for us” (translated from the song *This song is so chill* [30]). Den always shows himself not to be a materialistic rapper in the showbiz world, but a rapper with devotion to the art.

To sum up, Den Vau's rap lyrics exhibit a remarkable breadth of compassion, ranging from empathy for the struggles of youth, parents, and impoverished children, to a universal concern for all living beings and the natural environment. He even turns this compassion inward, lamenting the personal pressures he faces as an artist. Through these diverse expressions of compassion, Den Vau has established himself as a significant voice in contemporary Vietnamese rap, showing how traditional values can be expressed through modern musical forms.

3. Conclusions

Den Vau adapts rap as a medium to express his profound reflections on human nature and life. His lyrics consistently demonstrate qualities that align with universal values of loving-kindness and compassion - values that are also central to Buddhist teachings. Through his songs, he addresses various dimensions of human experience - from the struggles of young people and families to broader concerns for all living beings. The themes of loving-kindness and compassion in his work, while reminiscent of Buddhist principles, transcend religious boundaries and resonate deeply with contemporary audiences. His artistry shows how these timeless values can be effectively conveyed through modern musical forms to connect with today's listeners.

Buddhist principles of loving-kindness and compassion permeate Den's artistic expression and worldview. His lyrics reflect a deep love for humanity, from intimate family relationships to broader social concerns, such as the struggles of highland children facing food insecurity. His

compassionate perspective extends beyond human suffering to environmental consciousness, expressing concern for nature's destruction. These authentic emotions and philosophical reflections resonate deeply with listeners, perhaps explaining why Den Vau has emerged as a distinctive voice in Vietnamese rap, touching audiences in a uniquely gentle and profound way. The integration of Buddhist values in his rap has thus created a meaningful connection with listeners' spiritual lives, demonstrating the enduring relevance of traditional wisdom in contemporary art forms.

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