

How you can be heard
– or –
Kathy's hair is black and loud
Stefan Carmien

If you are going to be teaching the dharma is it almost certain that you will use microphones and a PA at some point in your teaching career. In this respect we are not so different from other mainstream religions in presentation of teachings or talks. Like prospective rabbis, pastors and ministers, one of the skills you need to master as part of communicating the dharma is learning how microphones and PA (public address systems) work and how to use them skillfully.

A typical PA in a dharma center will consist of one or more microphones, a microphone mixer, and amplifier speakers and recording devices. Your concern is that the students can hear you clearly, that questions can be heard clearly, and that recording of the event can be done for later listening. Here we are not discussing video recording, but what is said about audio recording and microphones is also applicable in a video situation. Hopefully you will have a knowledgeable staff volunteer to set up the system before a talk. If not, you may want to contact Kalapa recordings for help in doing this to SI standards.

Assuming that the hall is setup right, you are going to need to know how to use a microphone. The microphone will take your voice and turn it into a signal that will be amplified and recorded. There two basic kinds of microphones: those with a cardioid (directional) pickup pattern and those with an omnidirectional pickup pattern. (See Figures 1 and 2)

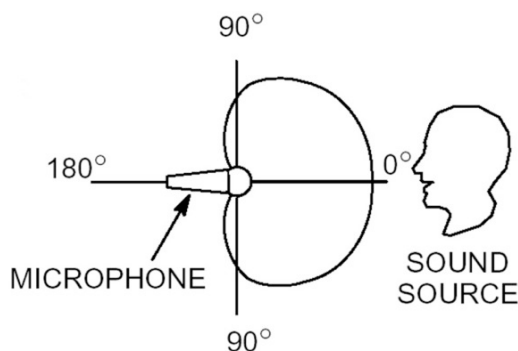


Figure 1 - Cardioid – directional

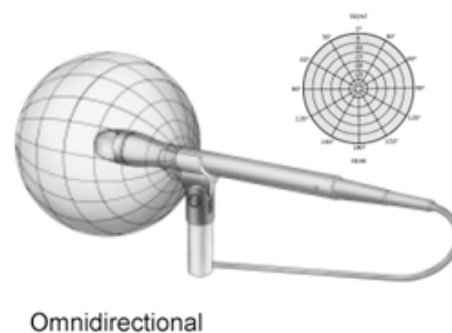


Figure 2 – Omnidirectional

Of these kind there are also two variants in physical form – clip-on (also known as lavalier) or hand-held (see Figures 3 and 4). Further, these microphones can come in wired and wireless versions.



Figure 3 - Clip-on



Figure 4 – Handheld

Cardioid mikes are a lot easier to use without producing feedback (that howling sound the PA can make). Omnidirectional mikes really are only applicable to use in making recordings without amplification. We will assume that your system is setup correctly and you are using a cardioid mike.¹ What you need to operate it properly is to have the mike oriented so that the top of it points directly to your mouth. This really means properly adjusting the mike stand (typically a boom) (See Figure 5) so that the mike points directly at your mouth; it should not be too far away (more than 12 inches) or so close that you are uncomfortable or bump into it. (See Figure 6 below)



Figure 5 - Handheld mike usage



Figure 6 - On a boom stand

This takes care of the hand-held mike (on a stand). To properly use the clip-on or lavalier mike, you need to attach the clip that holds the mike somewhere on your chest about where your lapel would be if you were wearing a suit coat. You might want to look at television talk shows to see how they place clip-ons for the guests. Because the microphone will be a cardioid you will want to make sure the top of the mike (the other end from where the wire comes out) faces up towards your mouth. If you are wearing monastic robes or a dress you need to be careful that some of the fabric of your clothing will not rub against the microphone as you move while talking –

¹ If you are told that the mike is omnidirectional or you suspect it is so, you should ask the person in charge of the PA to replace it with a proper mike for PA work. Kalapa recordings is a good source of help in choosing the right mike.

this has often been a problem with visiting monastic teachers over the years.

If the microphone is wireless, it is important that the staff members make sure that the batteries in the transmitter (usually a box that the wire from the clip-on mike ends in or in the case of the hand held) are fresh. In professional use, wireless systems have new batteries put in them for every event; it is better for the Center to spend two Euros on batteries before an important talk than have the whole system stop working in the middle of your presentation (this is doubly true for talks by the Sakyong or acharyas).

The microphone is not a substitute for articulate expression in teaching the Dharma. You will need to speak clearly and project into the space. The best advice I have heard is to talk as if you did not have a microphone so that it serves as an aid rather than something that you absolutely need. Surprisingly, voices of Tibetan teachers who have little PA experience are usually very easy to amplify because they are used to talking to rooms full of students without amplification.

All this detail boils down to three things you need to do to be properly amplified.

1. *Speak so that the mike can pick you up;*
2. *Adjust the mike so that you can be picked up;*
3. *Make sure your microphone is ready to be used (i.e. wireless batteries)*

Eventually you will end up in a situation where the PA goes into feedback. This is where the speaker and the microphone are close enough so that the PA is feeding the amplified sound into the microphone and then **that** is further amplified and on and on – usually sounding like an electronic howl. Your center PA guy, if she is there, can correct this with their mixer controls. But if they are not there the first thing you can do about this is to make sure that the microphone is pointed towards you and not in the direction of one of the speakers in the hall. Sometimes just moving the microphone/stand solves the problem, and sometimes moving your chair (and the mike) back a bit away from the speakers will solve it. It would be helpful if the staff do a sound check before the event, to make sure everything is working.

One last tip. It's always a good idea to have someone listen to part of the recording of a talk (if it is being recorded) on the first night of the program. I have seen many instances of going back to the recordings weeks later and discovering them incoherent or unintelligible. If there is a problem, it gets caught that first night and the rest of the program's recordings will be good. Obviously, this is not your responsibility, but it would help if you make sure it's done. Only a couple of minutes from the middle of the talk should be enough to assure you it's being recorded correctly.

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