# Where Dharma Meets Technology Meets Art

**DHARMA AND THE MODERN WORLD**

*April-June 2013*

*Multi-media artist and entrepreneur Scott Snibbe stands out as an exemplary American Gen-X Dharma practitioner – deeply connected to computer technology, fluent in pop culture, concerned about leading a meaningful life and creatively combining all these elements in compelling new ways. In March 2013, he's leading an innovative retreat through* Vajrapani Institute *on the eight worldly dharmas that has residential and online components. He spoke with* Mandala's *managing editor Laura Miller in late January 2013 about the retreat as well as his spiritual and technological background and his passion for exploring the artistic potential of digital light, motion and color.*

***Mandala***: You're someone who's having a successful career in computer technology. You also are active in Dharma communities and a dedicated practitioner. How did you come to practice Dharma?

**Scott Snibbe**: I come from a very heterogeneous spiritual background. My parents were Jewish, but they converted to Christian Scientists when I was born, so I was raised in Christian Science, which is actually a pretty good preparation for Buddhism because it's belief that your mind is really the source of everything. Christian Science is kind of like a Chittamatra (Mind-Only school) view, a very extreme point of view that everything is mind. So I


Scott Snibbe

was raised with that, which was very empowering. And luckily, we didn't get into too many accidents or anything, because, as you may know, Christian Scientists don't go to doctors. [laughs] That's the part that I could never quite jive with. Even as a kid I thought, "Well, everybody dies and everybody seems to get sick, so I don't understand Christian Science totally. Even if Jesus manages to heal himself and bring himself back from the dead, just because I decide to follow him, doesn't necessarily mean I'd be any good at it." That always confused me, and I never actually joined the Christian Science church for that reason, but I loved talking about spirituality and going to Sunday

school.

I had a kind of barren time in my 20s; I guess from 25 to 30, I kind of gave up Christian Science and didn't really have a spiritual path. It was really painful for me honestly. At that time, my brother got into Tibetan Buddhism. When I was a kid we had some Zen books around, and we did yoga and a little bit of meditation. My brother married a Chinese woman and they went to Tibet. When he went there, he had a very powerful experience that inspired him to come back and study Buddhism in Boston, and he started going to Kurukulla Center, the FPMT center there, and studying with Geshe Tsulga. I watched him for about four years, and I was a little nervous that he was going to lose his personality or something like that by becoming a Buddhist. But what really happened was the opposite. My brother had been a really hardcore skate punk – a wild character. He is a photojournalist now. Practicing Buddhism brought out all the beautiful parts of his personality – his humor, kindness and generosity – and rounded the edges of the rougher parts. He kept sending me books by the Dalai Lama and by other Buddhist teachers such as Thich Nhat Hanh. I'm a little embarrassed to say it, but I couldn't really understand some of them. Tibetan Buddhism is complicated.

In 2000, however, I saw that His Holiness the Dalai Lama was coming to L.A., and I bought tickets for my brother and me. We are basically best friends, and I thought, "Well, I have a lot of patience. I can sit through anything, and this will probably be a fun trip for the two of us to just spend a week together." Literally the instant I saw the Dalai Lama, I wanted to become a Tibetan Buddhist. To me, it was like seeing Jesus. I just thought, "Whatever he is having, give me the same thing." I knew his history; I knew what happened to the Tibetan people – the holocaust they experienced – and yet he had so much love and compassion and humor. I just wanted to follow his path. I took copious notes, misspelling all the Sanskrit words and so on.

Luckily, there was an FPMT center in San Francisco, Tse Chen Ling, which I discovered. My brother's teacher Geshe Tsulga introduced me to Geshe Ngawang Dakpa, the resident teacher at Tse Chen Ling. It turned out Geshe Tsulga and Geshe Dakpa went to the same monastery together and were very close friends. When you used to see them together, they would be holding hands and sitting together at Dalai Lama teachings. Very beautiful. I started studying at Tse Chen Ling. It was very harmonious because my brother was studying the same things at Kurukulla Center. Then our sister also got into it and started practicing, so all three of us siblings – my brother, sister and me – all became Tibetan Buddhists. Then I became very involved with Tse Chen Ling. In 2002, I started doing retreats at Vajrapani Institute, in Boulder Creek, California, mostly with Ven. René Feusi. If I had to name my root lamas, I guess they would be His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Geshe Dakpa and

Ven. René, in terms of how many teachings I have taken and the feeling of closeness.
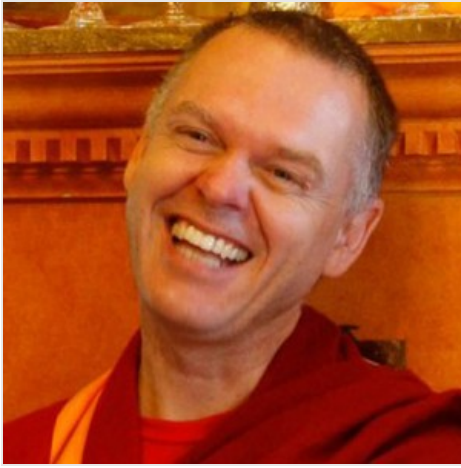

Ven. René Feusi

I went through a lot with Ven. René, and I really love his teachings. His teachings for meditation, I found, were unparalleled. Over eight years, he went through kind of everything from soup to nuts, from sutra to tantra. I did some longer retreats. During that time I was doing about a month of retreat a year, broken up into segments, and I feel really lucky I got to do that because now he is mostly doing long-term retreat, so we don't get to have that chance anymore. That's it in a nutshell. I was on the board of directors at Tse Chen Ling for a long time, I led meditation there for five years, and now I am on the board of Vajrapani, and I am leading a retreat there, too.

*Mandala*: Tell me about the Vajrapani retreat in March; it has a significant online component. Could you tell me about how this program came to be and the details about how it is going to work?

**Scott Snibbe**: What we were noticing with Vajrapani, and other centers might be seeing the same thing, is a sea-change in our culture that is affecting the attendance at the retreat center. I think it has a lot to do with mobile devices, which is kind of ironic because that is my business. The competition for people's time and attention went through the roof two or three years ago when everybody started buying iPhones and iPads and so forth. You know, you even see these studies that teenagers and 20-somethings don't want cars anymore. When they have to choose between the internet and owning a car, they would choose the internet. Car buying has gone down noticeably among people under 25 because of the attraction of online social experiences. So we are trying to figure out at Vajrapani how to get ahead of the curve instead of behind it. Instead of trying to market more and more aggressively residential retreats, we want to see if there is a way to dovetail with the online world and the mobile world and to engage people that way.

We even have a much bigger vision than the retreat we have been talking about, which is building a whole platform where anybody in the world can get daily meditation instruction with really clear goals and rewards to advance them through the stages of the path. Then later, bring them back to real-life experiences with retreats at Vajrapani and eventually other places around the world. People can self-guide in their personal practice, but then have someplace to go for the intensive, personal, one-on-one live retreat that deepens and expands it.

There are three other people involved, principally Fabienne Pradelle, who is the director at

Vajrapani Institute, Brett Bowman and Margaret Kim. We've talked about raising money, raising venture capital, all these different ways of doing it – but then we decided, let's try a pilot. We found an online platform that we can leverage. I am going to lead this first retreat in the beginning of March and then continue it with a one-month online program that takes the practices we did in retreat and helps people to build a daily practice around them.

*Mandala*: What is the topic for the retreat and the following online sessions?

**Scott Snibbe**: The topic is the eight worldly dharmas, which I hope doesn't scare people away. There is a great book from Lama Zopa Rinpoche that was recently published called *How to Practice Dharma* [from Lama Yeshe Wisdom Archive]. We'll be trying to focus on the true causes of happiness. I've heard it said that Buddhism is for people who are actually a little bit better off because people realize that even if they get a little bit of the satisfaction they were looking for materially – in terms of relationships and status, job and wealth – they realize they are not quite satisfied. I remember feeling that way when I was about 30 or so when I got into Tibetan Buddhism. That is the angle: even if you like a nice glass of wine, having some money in the bank and a good job, if you are honest with yourself, you see that these things are not actually the true causes of happiness, although they may be the cause of comfort.

*Mandala*: What is the online component going to be like? How does that work?

**Scott Snibbe**: The online component is inspired by the way Ven. René taught lam-rim. He taught a class called Experiential Lam-Rim at Vajrapani over several years. We would study one lam-rim topic for maybe six weeks and then meditate on it daily. That is the idea with this course. For each of the four weeks we will read a little section of *How to Practice Dharma* and do one specific type of meditation with a little bit of calm abiding and some bodhichitta as preliminaries. Whatever the main topic is for the week, we'll do it daily to get some familiarity.
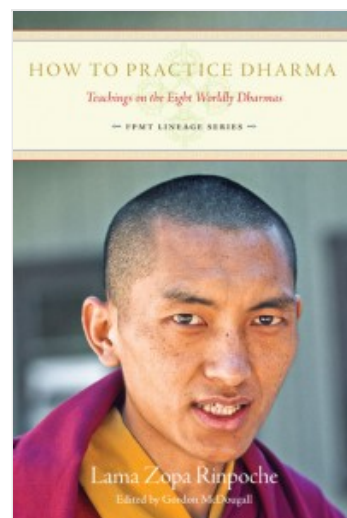
Ven. René would often say, "I'm not sure about the benefit of these two- and three-day weekend retreats because people really need a community and a daily practice in order to get any kind of real progress in their spiritual life." We're taking his advice and trying to give people a daily structure – in this case, in the context of an online course – and we are trying to offer clear rewards too. Every day you have a little thing you can check off and see your progress and say, "Oh, great! I did that."

I think one of the minor innovations is acknowledging that people love to make progress, check things off lists and keep up with the social group that they are in. We are trying to leverage some of those natural tendencies of people that you see work well in social networks and in video games, but to use it for something really worthwhile, which is developing your daily practice and very positive states of mind.

*Mandala*: Are people going to meet online and you are going to talk in real time?

**Scott Snibbe:** That model actually doesn't work that well. Online is asynchronous. The way it works is that it is more of a discussion board, so people can have a conversation, but they can have it whenever it is convenient to them. There will be a live discussion kind of like on Facebook where it says so-and-so has just commented on your post. It will be easy for people to write a question and then see an answer later, write a comment and see other people comment on it, but not worry about the timing.

We are planning to have one real-time session a week for discussions, which is open for people to come and talk and hear each other's voice, but the main idea is to have it totally asynchronous so that it fits people's schedules. Then people can decide when to do their meditation. It is generally recommended in the morning because then you don't miss it and it doesn't get lost with the rest of your day. But that is self-measured.

*Mandala*: I know there are a lot of people in different parts of the worldwide FPMT mandala trying to figure out how to use technology to extend the reach of Dharma. It's exciting to hear about this.

**Scott Snibbe**: We will probably have to experiment. We are already getting people saying, "Oh, I want to do the online course, but I can't get to Vajrapani on March 1." We may have chosen the wrong model for our pilot, but we are going to keep experimenting. I've learned this from being an entrepreneur that it may take four or five tries and some true failure, but I think we will find the model within 18 months or so. We will find one that works, and then take that and elaborate on it and then maybe start spending some more money and effort on a bigger platform that other people could use.

*Mandala*: How does your Dharma practice comes into play and influences you in the work you do?

**Scott Snibbe**: Being raised in a Christian Scientist family, I was literally taught from the first

moment I can remember that all of reality was just a reflection of your mind, that your mind was the most powerful force in the universe, and that we are infinite – that we have always lived, and we always will live, and that transforming your mind is the way to transform your reality and to create the cause of happiness. I am really grateful for that background. My parents were both artists who work with technology. They were very rebellious. They were New Yorkers who grew up in a heavy duty art scene. They used to go to Andy Warhol parties and things like that. Then they moved to this little town in Massachusetts called Scituate, and we had this pretty idyllic life in a giant house. It was a 14-room or 15-room house with no television. We had a wood shop and a plastic shop and making things was our main form of entertainment. It was our most important value. I say it is still both of my parents' primary value in life. This idea of the spirituality of creativity was embraced by them to the point that we were actually allowed to skip school if we had a project we wanted to work on at home. Our parents actually let us write our own notes to excuse ourselves from school because they didn't want to wake up in the morning. They would say, "Just write your own note, and we'll back you up."

I got into computers when I was still a kid in 1980. We came to the Silicon Valley area in California. We moved to Pebble Beach, which is south of San Francisco, near Vajrapani actually. (I wish I had known about Vajrapani when I was a kid.) I had this textbook on inventors that was my dad's from college and I read it maybe seven times even before I was seven years old. I couldn't get enough of reading about Thomas Edison, the steam engine, and all the other inventions. When I was 10, I saw an Apple II computer and I saw computer graphics, and I said, "This is what I want to do with my life. I want to make interactive computer graphics." I am one of those people who knew what they wanted to do their whole life. I told my parents, and they were like, "What? How much does this computer cost?" I worked all summer to raise money. I convinced my brother that he wanted it to play video games on, my grandpa chipped in a third, and I got a computer. By the time I was 18, I already knew seven programming languages and I had written all of these programs. My best friend's dad was a pretty famous computer entrepreneur named Gary Kildall, and we were employees at his company when we were 11. We helped out with shipping software on a product called DR Logo.

I went to school and I studied computer science, film and fine art. I thought I would go into special effects, working on *Star Wars* and things like that. But I watched carefully the lives of my friends who went into that, because I really wanted to have a happy life. I didn't want to be in a job that had high status but was awful every day to go to. I saw my friends who went into special effects and it didn't seem really spiritually satisfying or socially satisfying. Instead I went with my buddies who had started a company that created a special effects program called After Effects, which later got

bought by Adobe. I couldn't really do the more far-out stuff I wanted to do with computers at Adobe. What I really wanted to do was to connect bodies and computers, to have interfaces that were natural. Now they call them "natural user interfaces," where you don't even notice a computer, that it is just a part of your everyday life the same way that a sunset or a pond or sand is. It's kind of an extreme example, but my dream was that computers would be more like these natural materials that you interact with through gesture and sound. I later worked at a research lab for about four years where this kind of thinking was encouraged. It was called Interval Research in Palo Alto and was founded and run by Paul Allen. They had really deep pockets to explore the future of human-computer interface.

I always had these digital art projects that I didn't really have a name for. I often used to call them "useless programs." It was kind of a defensive name because that was what some of my professors called them in school. They were pure, like being in a dream or abstract film, but interactive. There are ways of using the computer screen just as a pure light abstraction, movement, color – a new art form. I had difficulty finding an audience for this work, but it was a real personal passion of mine. It started getting noticed by the art world around that same time – this was the mid-'90s. I started spending a lot more time on that type of thing. I really thought there was a business for these interactive experiences that didn't have any other purpose other than to convey a positive emotional experience and tried to get funding. To be honest, I also had this ulterior motive of increasing people's concentration and their long-term engagement, kind of like calm abiding. It was a little bit far-fetched thinking there was a market for them, but I really didn't care that much. You know, you want to do something that is meaningful in your life and that you have a passion for. I was pushing this idea and making these things on the side, and the main recognition they got was in the art world. They are in the collection of some big museums like the Whitney Museum and the MoMA [Museum of Modern Art]. But I was always looking for a way to just give it to everybody. I didn't really like the way the art world worked. I often joke, imagine the Beatles as an art group and they make this song *All You Need is Love* and then sell it in an edition of three or four for $100,000 each or something, right? I never wanted to do that. I wanted to find a way that you could sell things for a dollar the same way they sell songs.

Video: Installation piece by Scott Snibbe; "All Futures That Could Possibly Be"; Single channel video, 2007; Eighty-nine-year-old Richard Snibbe reads an excerpt from Samantabadra's "King of Prayers."

I got pretty discouraged over the years, but then a few years ago a way emerged to do these things with the iPhone and the iPad. So I released some of these projects that were previously exclusive to galleries and museums, and all of a sudden there was a market for them. And you didn't have to explain what they were; it didn't matter. You just give it a name, give it a price, and people use it. They sold really well. One called Gravilux had 600,000 downloads. When you look at the reviews, you saw normal people saying some of the things I had hoped people would get out of these programs. One person said, "Oh, you know at the end of the day I am often so stressed and tired, and then I play with your program, Gravilux, and after 10 minutes I actually feel quite relaxed and calm, and it has kind of taken me down from all the stress of the day." That made me really happy. Obviously, this kind of art game can't take the place of meditation, but I actually do think it is possible to get some of the same effects. A person has to use their own mind to get into that state, but it is possible, I believe, to get people into positive mental states through interactive technology like this.

One of the things I really believe that many people thought was contradictory was that computers could be a way to get you closer to nature. Most of those programs that I wrote, programs like Gravilux and Bubble Harp, they are ways of giving people a feeling of nature, something that is like nature, but doesn't actually exist in our universe. The same kind of feeling as sitting on a beach looking at the ocean or watching a sunset, watching ripples in water. There is an essence to nature that is mathematical and algorithmic and also has this infinite range. There is way more of nature, you could think, than what exists in our universe. That is what these programs do. They can take

people into that same mental state that nature can take you to. Ven. René once told me a reason why nature is so positive for people. He said, "There are no objects of attachment out of nature."

Other people who had similar ideas about computer technology and nature noticed what I was doing. One was Björk. She wanted to release her next album as an interactive app rather than as an album, which is a dying format. I was so happy to meet her. I had always been a fan. She said, "I use technology," in her case for electronic music, "to get people closer to nature, closer to feelings." It is really true in her music if you listen to it. We ended up doing a huge project with her called *Biophilia* which means "a love for nature," "a love for life." It is the first time someone released an album as an app, and there are all these different interactive experiences in it that we wrote. I worked with Björk and a bunch of other engineers and people to produce this very unique feature-length interactive tour through the connections between nature, music and technology. Something Björk says in the beginning – she wrote the intro to the app read by David Attenborough that plays as you launch it – "Music is sound plus generosity." I don't think anyone could say it in quite the same way. And I think it is true to the spirit of art too, that in general, art is a gift to others.

*Mandala*: Could you talk about the idea of interactive technology and art? In particular how do you think about the potential negative aspects that can come with technological developments?

**Scott Snibbe**: I have a side-note about the negative and positive directions of things, because even meditation can be used for evil, right? Milarepa's life is a good story of that. Or in the movie the *Empire Strikes Back* Darth Vader is always meditating. He is in his little metal egg meditating; getting better and better at single-pointed concentration so he can conquer the whole universe. I think it is important to note that anything, even meditation, can be used for good or evil.

In terms of interactive technology, nothing really exists until the mind engages with a bunch of parts and labels them and starts to build a story around it. I couldn't have said it when I was a kid like that, but because of the way I was raised, I always had this feeling. It becomes very literal and obvious to people that something is interdependent if they have to actually interact with it, touch it, move through it. This is the main reason I like interactivity: it forces people to realize that they are a part of the equation, that their interaction and their mind is required to make a situation occur. Looking at a painting is actually an interactive experience, but not many people realize it. Most people look in awe and think, "How could he ever make that? What was that artist thinking?" But in fact, the painting is only in your mind. All you are seeing is the picture in your brain and reflected into your mind, so it is at least half you. In some views, like the Chittamatra view, it is *all* you – all coming from your mind.

One of the very first interactive installations I made was called "Boundary Functions," and it is a floor that you walk on, and as you do, lines form between you and other people. You step on and the other person steps on, and then there is one line between you two. What it shows you is your personal space. That is his personal space; here is mine, but when that person leaves, I don't have any anymore. It shows you that I only have personal space when someone else is around. This thing that I call "mine," my personal space, is in fact, completely dependent on others and changes without my control. That was the idea I was trying to get at in my first art installation. The more people that get on this floor, the more complex it gets, and you get this pattern that looks like cells or bubbles that shows each person their personal space. But besides conveying the idea of personal space, it also changes social situations. What happens is that it makes people very playful. Even the most staid person with a glass of champagne in their hand and a tuxedo starts to dance around this floor with other people. It is something that makes you want to dance with strangers. Those two big ideas are the ones that kind of excite me about interactivity: conveying this idea (even if it is at a gut level) of dependent origination and bringing about positive social interactions. And, of course, you can make negative social interaction the same way. You can have a massive multiplayer online army game like the U.S. government had. The government recruited soldiers with these massive multiplayer social games, so the technology can be used for any purpose.

Video: "Boundary Functions," 1998, Scott Snibbe.

*Mandala*: How do you see your future? Where do you want to take this next?

**Scott Snibbe**: This is where I have to just admit I am a very ambitious person. And I never thought I would be. My parents taught us contentment growing up. They'd said, "You can be a truck driver or whatever." But, I got so excited about the technologies and now I run two companies [Snibbe Studio, which develops apps, and Snibbe Interactive, which creates interactive installations].

There are three main things, which connect with the companies I run and with Vajrapani, that I am really excited about as a big, long-term goals. On the app side, I want to make a creative platform, more like Instagram or Facebook, where people can create and share interactive visual music experiences. To date we have made a few apps that people enjoy, but they are very expensive, and they are time consuming, and we just make one or two a year. I have an idea for a platform that would open that up to everybody that I am really excited about and started working on this year.

On the installation side at Snibbe Interactive, the thing that excites me long term is creating something like the Holodeck, like an immersive interactive platform where any kind of story could be told. You walk into this kind of dome or surround experience with a group of people and you could be transported anywhere. Of course, a lot of that will probably end up being for Hollywood movies and for science museums, like walking with dinosaurs. I also have the fantasy that you could become immersed in a visualization, like a Vajrayana visualization. Not everybody has very strong visualization abilities, and Vajrayana lends itself to more visual people. I always dreamed you could walk into the space and have interactive animation all around you that recapitulates the things that we visualize, that we are taught to visualize in meditation. But that seems like a side use of a technology, which will probably be mostly used for entertainment and learning.

Lastly, this idea of the mobile meditation experience, like what we are doing with Vajrapani. We are starting very small, but I believe there is a way to make a world-wide platform that everyone can use. The main thing is that I want something that people can use every day with their iPhone first thing in the morning, instead of checking their mail or the *New York Times*. It guides them through their daily meditation and helps them advance through the stages of the path. That is a long-term goal, and we need to experiment in these lightweight, inexpensive ways for maybe a year and then move forward. The people involved are all very dedicated practitioners and also quite competent from a business and/or technology side. The four of us have these backgrounds that we want to leverage into making this platform.

*Mandala*: Talk a little bit about your new app REWORK.

**Scott Snibbe**: REWORK was our second app album that we produced, and the album was

produced by Beck and its remixes of Philip Glass' music. They were interested in getting Philip Glass' music out to a younger and different audience by getting all these remix artists to expand on it. My wife, Ahna Girshick was the producer of the app album. What it does is it gives you visualizations of all the songs on the album, so they turn into interactive music visualizations. There is this really graceful transition between non-interactive and interactive view. If someone wants, they can just lean back and watch the whole album or they can lean forward and they can start interacting, touching and visualizing the music.

Philip's music has amazing structure to it. People actually think it is so simple, which is kind of funny because in a way it is some of the most complex and difficult to perform music that there is. What we have done is visualize the structure of the music, but we didn't do it completely literally. It is driven by the notes and structure of the music, but we have interpreted the pieces like moving, abstract paintings. Each song has a different style of animated, visual painting that takes the structure of the music and makes it visual so that you are meant to appreciate the music more and to have a total sensory immersion with it. In general, when you combine your senses, you get this feeling of total immersion. When you are just listening to music, then whatever you are watching becomes the music video, like driving down the highway or sitting on the subway, and that is not necessarily what the musicians had in mind when they made their music.
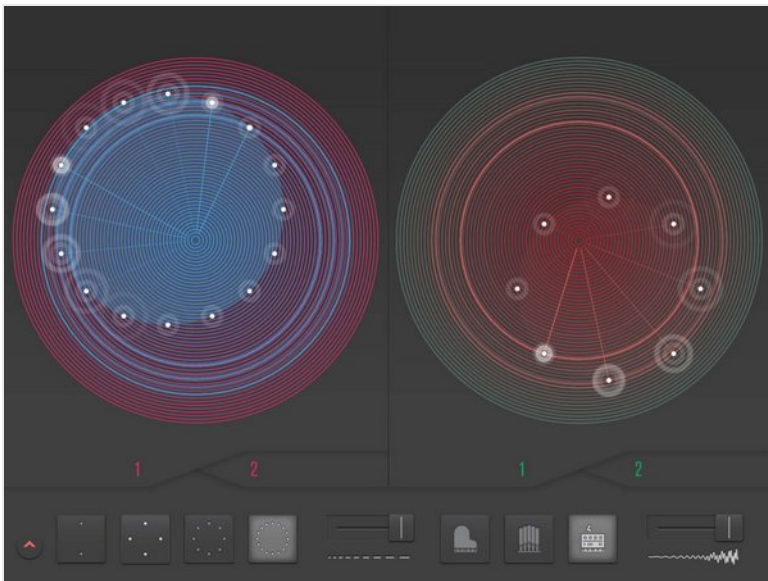


Screenshot from "Glass Machine" on REWORK

Then there is one part of the app that lets you make your own music called the "Glass Machine." It takes the way Philip Glass makes music by putting these two arpeggios against each other and making them play tightly together. You can make these just by pushing little disks around on spidery turntables. You don't need to know anything about music theory. You don't need to know when to start and when to stop or how to play an instrument. That was really exciting for people,

especially people who really like music but don't play an instrument; it just really, really pleases them to be able to have that experience of an artist. Because an artist or a musician gets into these states that are meditative, where you are completely at one with whatever you are making. Sometimes for hours on end you completely lose your sense of self; it is actually why there is so much pleasure and satisfaction in being an artist, but non-artists don't generally have that experience, and that is what the experience of these kind of apps, especially these feature length musical apps, are supposed to do. It is to give you that feeling of being completely at one with the music and experience and losing the sense of yourself within it.

We didn't work with Philip to design this. He has done lots of collaborations and he generally trusts the people whom he signs up with on the visual side, but I did get a chance to meet with him and show him the app. You can see it on the video we made for the app. He said, "Wow. This is a chance for an ordinary person to see what it is like to make music and to play with musical material." So that was satisfying. And, of course, he is a very devoted Tibetan Buddhist. I think he was more excited about the picture of Nagarjuna on my lock screen! He was very focused on that for the first few minutes of our conversation. He immediately noticed. He said, "Nagarjuna!" It was really a privilege working with him. I think he is one of the great people alive today and a gift to the planet, and has given us another subtle way of spreading the teachings of the Buddha.

*Scott Snibbe was born in 1969 in New York City and is a media artist, filmmaker, and entrepreneur as well as a dedicated Dharma student. He lives in San Francisco with his family. Visit Scott Snibbe's website to see more examples of his art, installations, films and apps.*

*Scott Snibbe is currently leading a one-month online meditation program through Vajrapani Institute called "What is Dharma? Rising Above the Eight Worldly Concerns." The program is being so well received that another combined retreat and online program is already in the works for July 2013. Stay tuned to Vajrapani's website for more information to come.*