



Free Buddhist Audio Community – Preparing Your Talks

The most important thing about contributing your talks to Free Buddhist Audio happens well before you ever get to the upload stage. What really matters most is the quality of the original recording. **We can't stress this point enough!** Most of the mp3s we receive from community archives really suffer from poor original sound quality – they're not loud enough and they are often recorded in formats with high compression rates that make for a poor listening experience.

We recognise that not everyone has the time and resources to devote to using fancy techniques to improve things after the fact – but if you bear a few simple things in mind before and after recording, then you'll be able to ensure your recordings sound good to all those you want to hear them.

So the real key is to remember just that – that you have an audience! If you follow the following recommendations, you won't go too far wrong, and your audience will likely be delighted. And if you're not sure of anything, then please feel free to get in touch with us and we'll do our best to help.

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1. Recording Advice

A. Check your levels

Before you make a recording of a talk, it helps to do a quick sound check (with the speaker, if possible), then listen back to check that the input level is loud enough and will make for easy listening later. Remember – many users will be listening on speakers of some kind, *not* headphones which can sound deceptively loud.

As a rule of thumb, if there is a sound/signal meter on your recording device, use that to judge things. The signal should be just pushing into the 'red' area when someone is talking into the microphone at their loudest level. If the signal is straining right through the red area most of the time, then it's too loud and you'll get distortion. If the signal isn't consistently filling most of the 'green' area (and pushing the red a bit) then it's too quiet. It's worth taking time to get this right!

B. Microphone choice

Unless you're experienced in using clip-on mics and know how to avoid the pitfalls (*lots* of rustling, wheezing, etc.), then it's best to use a fixed, standard microphone, positioned close to the speaker's mouth. If you can control the angle at which it picks up sound, it's usually best to set at 90 degrees.

C. Other tips

Here a few bits of other advice that will cut out most of the problems we routinely encounter with files sent to us for the site:

- i. Start recording **before** the speaker starts the talk proper! You've no idea how many times we get talks with the first few words missing...
- ii. If there's an introduction and/or summary at the end, please by all means record these. If you can set a track mark for them live on the recorder, then that's helpful when it comes to dividing the talks into tracks (if you want to do that).
- iii. Record a fair bit of any clapping that happens at the end, and if you can (during recording or after), fade it out... This is a lot more elegant than a loud burst being cut off. If you can't fade out, then just include all the applause until it's finished naturally – or edit it out altogether.
- iv. Keep the main power supply to your recorder plugged in if you can. Batteries have a habit of dying at just the wrong moment...

2. Choice of Recording Format

Assuming you're making a digital recording, if you can record first as .wav or .aiff (full cd quality) and **convert afterwards to mp3** using iTunes or Windows Media Player (or equivalent), then that's the best bet in terms of sound quality. It's easier to make adjustments to full quality files if need be, and loss in sound quality is minimized when conversion to mp3 takes place.

Please try to avoid recording in one kind of compressed audio format (eg. Windows Media Audio – wma – or a proprietary dictaphone format) then converting to mp3. This will usually result in noticeable sound degradation.

We realise the path of least resistance for you may likely be to make a direct mp3 recording, since this is the final format for your talks on the site. So, if you do go with this option, here's what to do:

The way we need the finished file (after any editing you might choose to do) is as **an mp3 with at a bit rate of 64 kbps; joint stereo or mono, constant bit rate (*N.B. not variable bit rate*)**.

If you are recording directly to mp3 however, we suggest recording at a much higher bit rate first (eg. 256kbps or 320kbps) and then after you've got a finished version converting down to 64kbps for upload. That way you'll get a great recording to work with and it will likely sound better when further compressed.

This is very important! We will be using the file you upload to generate smaller versions for broadband use, streaming online, and for dial-up modem users in countries where broadband access is limited (eg. India).

If you do make full quality recordings first, we'll need you to convert to mp3 at 64kbps too. You can set this in iTunes or Windows Media Player.

3. Editing and Making Adjustments

A. Basic editing

Please bear in mind that someone listening to a talk won't be making the same allowances as someone who was actually there. Long gaps when the speaker loses their place – prolonged sneezing/coughing fits – rambling or incoherent introductions/summaries: all these things are a lot harder to handle if you don't have the live context!

Of course, your recordings don't have to be perfect, so don't sweat the small stuff – but it can really pay to spend a little bit of time cleaning up any major distractions. It's also really helpful to take paper notes during a talk of the rough timings when any loud noises or major fumbings occur. This makes it much easier to find and edit them out later!

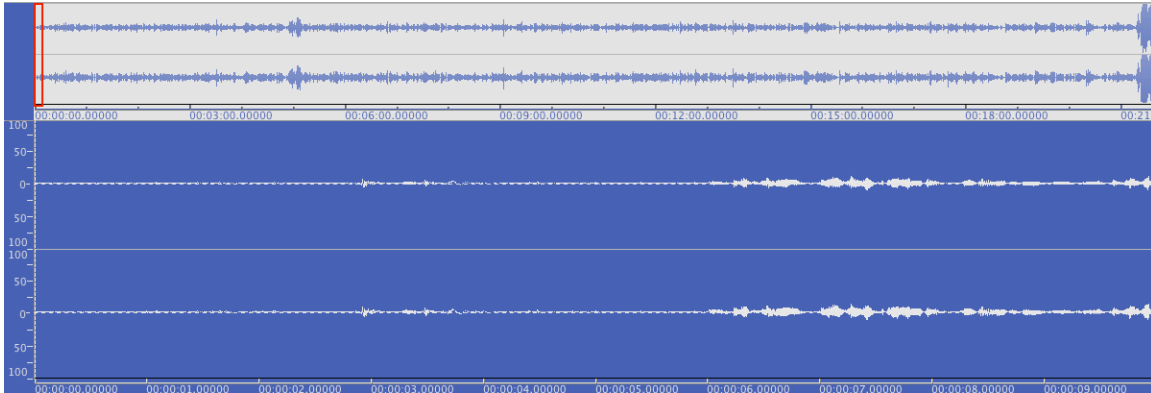
If you do end up with a recording that isn't loud enough, or needs a bit of editing, there are many 'wave form' programs available for this. One of the best free options is 'Audacity', which you can download here: <http://audacity.sourceforge.net/>

You'll be able to find instructions for basic (and very easy) audio editing – cutting, fading out, etc. – within the 'Help' on whatever program you use.

B. Volume and sound adjustments

Since volume adjusting can be more complex, here are some essential tips for turning it up if it is a bit quiet...

- i. Try '**normalise**' effect before anything else. Most programs include this option in their effects suite. If the wave form for your file looks small on screen (as below), then you can safely turn it up by 'normalising', without risking any distortion.



What this does is look for the loudest point of the sound file and raise the volume of everything else relative to it, if it's possible to do so without distorting the loudest point.

Simply select the whole wave (usually control-A on a PC, command-A on a Mac) and choose the 'normalise' function from the menu.

This works best, of course, when the file has an even level throughout. If it has one or two full peak points (clapping, a laugh, a loud noise in the room), then it won't have much effect. However, you can select all the wave up to and after these peaks, and normalise them separately. So in the above image, you would select all of the wave up to the burst of applause at the end (the blue patch top right of the image)... If you're going to get more detailed than this, be sure to select carefully, so you don't get big sudden drop-offs in sound level in the middle of a talk!

- ii. If you're going to experiment with EQ adjustments or compression/gain effects, then please pay attention so as to avoid distortion or 'clipping' of the sound.
- iii. After you've turned up the sound, check that background hiss/noise isn't now unacceptably loud. If it is, you may have to experiment with a bit of noise reduction, again included with most good programs.
- iv. Don't just change the 'volume adjustment' level in iTunes! This has no effect on the actual file, just on the way it plays on your own computer... If you need help to improve poor volume, ask us!

Checklist

1. *Make sure your recording levels are high enough – do a sound check with the speaker!*
2. *If at all possible, use a full quality recording format – .wav or .aiff.*

3. *Take a bit of time to edit the file afterwards. 10 minutes can make a huge difference! At the very least, tidy up the start and fade out the end where possible – ‘top and tail’ ...*
4. *Convert your finished file to mp3 using a bit rate (of 64 kbps).*

We hope this will help you in your noble task of uploading your community archive!
Again, if you need any help, please don't hesitate to get in touch...

<mailto:info@freebuddhistaudio.com>