

NEWSLETTER
August 2005
Revised November 2005
Number 14

CEREMONIAL WHEN SEEN AS AN OBSTACLE

A number of people have told me that they find our festival ceremonies—and our usual weekly ceremonies, as well—helpful. Some people, however, find that Soto Zen ceremonial continues to be a stumbling block in their training with us. I know that it was for me. I just didn't get it, and with my health problems, especially my low energy, I often found particular ceremonies overwhelming. It has taken me years to begin to "get it," and perhaps now my perspective can be useful to some of you. Please understand that what follows is simply my current understanding of certain aspects of ceremonial, and also of some difficulties that may be experienced with it. This article makes no pretense at complete coverage of the topic. Please also note that I still do not always find all ceremonial to be helpful. I am continuing to work on this. Perhaps we can work on it together.

So to begin, what is ceremonial? I will quote here from a fellow monk: " Buddhist ceremonial has developed over the centuries as a means of expressing gratitude for The Three Treasures of Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, of giving and receiving teaching regarding the meditative life, and of offering merit to others. Our Serene Reflection (Soto Zen) tradition also places particular emphasis on ceremonial as mindfulness training in its dynamic or active aspect. Through concentrating body, speech and mind in ceremonial form, we help cleanse our karma, develop aspects of the enlightened mind, and learn to live and work in harmony with others."*

Buddhism has always emphasized harmony, especially within the sangha or community of trainees. Ceremonial gives us an opportunity to work on this: working together willingly, with respect and gratitude, for a common purpose. It also gives us an opportunity to work on faith: trusting that someone who has more experience than we do, is showing us how to deepen our training in perhaps unanticipated ways. It gives us an opportunity to deepen our familiarity with helpful scriptures. And it gives us an opportunity to help others, by offering merit: each of the offertories in our services does precisely that, and some ceremonies are specifically directed to offering merit to some individual, group, animal, etc. who may be in particular need. Through this offering, ceremonial gives us the opportunity to become familiar with generosity and to work on the willingness to put it into practice.

As we go deeper in our training, we come to discover our own Buddha Nature—our *heart* as we often characterize it. Our practice is to "listen" to our heart in all that we do, while always using the Precepts as our guide, our aspiration, to acting on what we "hear". Over time we come to find that others who are training, and listening to their hearts, are hearing essentially the same thing that we are. Some of the details may differ at any particular time, but the basic direction is the same. This is the source of harmony in the sangha. We are all trying to listen to the same thing, so how can we ultimately differ? We describe this as the *One Mind*. And ceremonial gives us an opportunity to discover this in our own practice. It gives us an opportunity to work on allowing ourselves to become part of something bigger than ourselves and to willingly immerse ourselves in the One Mind.

Ceremonial helps us cultivate gratitude for the Truth, and it helps us see and respect the Buddha Nature in each of us. Bowing, which we do a lot of, is an expression of that gratitude and respect—toward the Buddha, the Dharma, the Ancestors and Sangha, our own Buddha Nature. Ultimately, ceremonial done respectfully, mindfully, willingly is meditation in activity, or activity in meditation. It is simply another lesson in making training real in our daily lives, and in the final analysis it is not different from our daily lives. Our daily lives should be approached with the same attitude of mind as ceremonial. We should do our best to always maintain the mind of meditation in all that we do. In effect meditation, ceremonial, and our daily lives become one.

Well, that sounds pretty good. So, what is the problem? For me, for many years, it was simply a physical ordeal, a kind of endurance test. That, however, was not intentional, although, when viewed through my own cloudy lenses, it sometimes seemed so. Ceremonial is meant to be helpful, just as is the rest of our practice. If you experience physical difficulty while participating in it, you are welcome to sit down. You may use a chair whenever you need to. As for bowing, just do

the best that you can. There are monks that can't get down on the floor, or that do so very creakily. That is fine. If something is still just more than you can physically handle, let's talk. As with everything else in our practice, doing the best that we can is all that is asked, as long as that doesn't become an excuse to do less than our best.

Speaking of doing the best that we can, ceremonial is a wonderful opportunity to learn to not worry about so-called mistakes. Initially, ceremonial is the part of our practice wherein our ignorance is most public, and that causes great discomfort for some people. We may have the delusion that we should always know what we are doing, or at least appear to. Well, if you are new to our practice, or to some part of our practice, e.g. precenting or chaplaining, how in the world can you expect to know what you are doing? So just let go. Be willing to try, and don't worry about making "mistakes." It would be nice to have another word here that doesn't have the same negative, judgmental connotations as *mistake*, but I haven't come up with one with which I am completely comfortable. One monk has used the word *wobbles*. Perhaps that helps you.

In any case, why are we so concerned about what others think of us? If we base our lives on other's judgments of us, then we rely on a very insubstantial foundation indeed. Our basic practice is to accept that we can never be fully in control, we never fully know what we are doing, in anything, not just in Buddhist training. The universal characteristic of impermanence guarantees that however good we may be at something, unanticipated difficulties will always arise. If we don't accept this, then we ensure our continuing distress.

If we want to deal with discomfort that may arise when we are seen to not know what we are doing, then we simply need to let go of our expectations that we somehow always should know. We need to let go of our judgmentalism. Since that is Buddhist practice anyway—i.e. to let go of our judgments of ourselves and others—ceremonial is a wonderful place to start. When we begin, we have full permission to not know what we are doing, to make mistakes. And we may do so in a sheltered, understanding, supportive environment. If we can't do it here, then where in the world will we learn to do so? Where will we have the courage to let go? Now this does not mean that, during a service, a monk or longer-term lay person may not let us know that we need to do something differently. After all, that is how we learn. In fact mistakes are our training. How else would we learn to change our behavior? We only learn what to do by having experience with what not to do. Truly, "mistakes" are the very basis of our training.

The above may be very to the point for some, but I suspect that the biggest difficulty for others is that our ceremonial is the thing that "tastes" most of religion. Well, Buddhism is a religion—and not merely a "way of life"—regardless of how we may feel about that.

If we have had bad experiences with religion, we naturally tend to color Buddhism by those past experiences. Nowadays, religion is much in the news and its press often isn't good. We don't want to get caught in whatever makes "religious" people act in such horrible ways. And on that potential difficulty, as with all others, we must simply trust our heart. Learning to trust one's heart, at least for most of us, is a difficult and prolonged learning process. When we find that a practice touches us, and we have found a teacher that teaches and keeps the Precepts, then, at that point, it is important to be willing to work on letting go of the tendency to mistrust. It is important to be willing to not be controlled by our past bad experiences. We do not ignore the lessons of those experiences, but we do not let them control us. And when we find a practice that speaks to our heart, we need to work on being willing to accept the whole practice (as long as it is Preceptual) and not continue to distrust and discard bits and pieces we simply do not like.

Others may find Buddhism uncomfortable, especially as expressed in its ceremonial (i.e. its most immediately, unambiguously, religious aspect), because we are still attached to another faith. If that faith teaches that any other religion must be wrong, or worse, then that puts us in a bit of a bind. Once again, we must trust our heart. Trust that That which is greater than us, can lead us to It, if we are willing, even if that eventually involves letting go of something dearly held.

Ceremonial (or ritual, as some may call it) may be associated in our minds with cults, or even magic, both of which can have disturbing connotations. Again, as the most immediately obviously religious practice we do, ceremonial can become, in essence, the scapegoat for all the suffering inflicted in the name of religion. Misunderstanding ceremonial was apparently also a problem in the time of the Buddha. He specifically warned against wrong understanding of, and attachment to, "rights and rituals." Ceremonial is not some shortcut to understanding; Buddhism is not a cult; and our practice specifically warns against the delusion of magic. No ritual will somehow magically transform our suffering. Nothing outside of ourselves can do our training for us. Ceremonial is, however, part of our path, and can be helpful when properly understood, and willingly entered into. Again, we need to trust our heart.

The greatest difficulty that some of us may have had with a particular past religious practice was simply our perception, justified or not, of its hollowness. Our faith may have felt damaged if we perceived teachers as having no real understanding of what they were teaching, or of the ceremonial they used. If we have ever felt this, we know that we don't want to subject our remaining trust to such a situation again. We are afraid of breaking something essential. Again we have to be careful not to let our past history make us avoid something spiritually attractive before we are able to experience it. Anyway, faith or trust, which always ultimately grow out of our longing for, and intuitive knowledge of, our own Buddha Nature, cannot be broken. It cannot even really be damaged, only hidden from our view by our own delusions, by the walls which we erect to guard what we mistakenly think of as fragile. Only we can choose to dismantle the walls, and that often takes a lot of courage.

Some of us come to Buddhism with expectations of finding "freedom." We may experience the forms of Buddhism, especially those that are unfamiliar to us, as an unnecessary constraint, and thus limiting to our freedom. It might be helpful here to remember our adolescent selves, or at least some of our then friends, who looked with impatience and disdain on the forms, the rules (the ritual) of the adult world. We wished to ignore those forms, or even sweep them away. As we matured we may have come to find value in at least some of those forms. Worldly forms tend to be the result of greed, hate, and delusion. If we can find value in some of them, perhaps we may be willing to have patient faith that, if we persevere, we may eventually find the value in the forms (ceremonial among them) of Soto Zen, since these are the expression of compassion, love, and wisdom.

Our practice is a path that has been shown to work, but it is a whole path, a path that is greater than the sum of its parts. It doesn't work to try to skip parts of the path, to pick and choose. In fact, in my experience, those parts that we most want to skip may be the most vital to follow, because they may lead directly through our greatest spiritual difficulties, where we have the most potential for growth. It is to be expected that we often wish to avoid the discomfort of those difficulties. Real training comes in the knowing that we wish to avoid something, and in accepting that it is good to face it—to dismantle our walls.

Just as we "sit like a Buddha to become a Buddha," we can use ceremonial to work on the willingness to trust our teacher/celebrant—who is listening to their heart—and in doing so we naturally begin to hear and trust our own heart. When we sit in meditation, we may feel nothing like a Buddha. But the practice works: if we sit willingly, humbly, patiently, letting go of our preconceptions, eventually we discover the Buddha sitting here with(in) us. Likewise, if we willingly, humbly, patiently, practice ceremonial, eventually we begin to "get it," and we begin to discover the "Ceremonial of Everyday Life." This can't happen without our acquiescence; but with perseverance, it will happen. And we will come to know the One Mind and the Harmony of the Sangha—our own heart.

Rev. Rokuzan Kroenke
Copyright © 2005, Columbia Zen Buddhist Priory

*Rev. Master Oswin Hollenbeck, *Buddhist Festival Ceremonies: Celebrated in the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives (a Serene Reflection Meditation tradition)*, 2002, Eugene Buddhist Priory