

# Ceremonial and Zen Training

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From west to east, unseen, flowed out the Mind of India's greatest Sage and, to the source,  
kept true as an unsullied stream is clear.

*White Robes and Koromos*

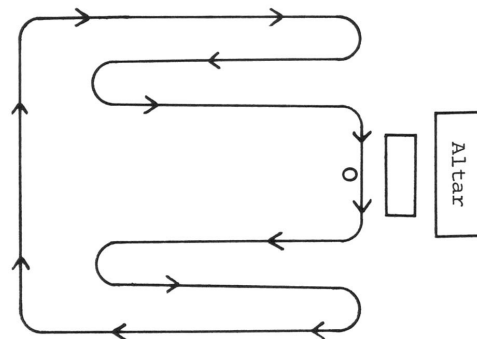
To many contemporary minds, religious ritual has become a subject of scorn, condemned as an outward superstition maintained by priests to entice gullible people into a belief in God, chiefly by appealing to their emotional needs and basic fears. It is certainly true that ritual, lacking the nourishment of sincere faith and a loving understanding, and performed out of ignorance or a sense of duty, soon deteriorates into a mechanical charade, exclusive, empty, and boring. For the purposes of this article, I prefer to use the word *ceremony* rather than ritual so as to distinguish the truly spiritual and willing act of love and service from all those tired and habitual acts which so often fill up the lives of men, until all that seems to remain is a constant ache and deadness - the cold ashes of empty ritual.

We begin to meditate in order to break through this circle of empty ritual, to discover and embrace our own Buddha Nature, thereby gradually and patiently approaching the ideal as represented by the Cosmic Buddha, the ideal of Immaculacy and Absolute Stillness. We do not meditate in order to become stone or ivory Buddhas, but to learn how to be fully *alive* and *active* in the service of the Lord of the House. In this regard, the ceremonies of Soto Zen are invaluable aids to our meditation, being both deeply spiritual and soundly practical. When properly understood, they help us to realize and appreciate the profound Teaching of the Heart of Fugen - *activity in stillness*. White robes and koromos are worn to *celebrate* our inherent Buddha Nature and to joyfully acknowledge the Buddha Nature in others. Every ceremony can thus become a mutual sharing in the Buddha-dharma, and not remain on the level of ritual or expertise. This is a very important point. All ceremonial must arise naturally from a pure and compassionate heart, otherwise the incessant attention to detail and outward forms could settle into an unhealthy obsession, devoid of any real spiritual value. I would urge the reader to bear this point well in mind during the remainder of the article so as to avoid possible misunderstandings.

In Chinese Buddhism, there is a traditional ceremony called *Serpentining or Dragoning the Buddha's Name*. The monks of the Amida sect, in moving meditation, walk slowly round the Meditation Hall in a winding, serpentine procession, while chanting the prayer, "Homage to the Buddha Amitabha."<sup>1</sup> At Shasta Abbey, important ceremonies such as Wesak Day and the commemorative ceremonies held each year for Dogen Zenji and Keizan Zenji, as well as many memorials, follow a similar pattern, although the details may differ. The greater part of this article will be devoted to a detailed examination of this particular form of ceremony because it illustrates very clearly the beauty and significance of ceremonial in Soto Zen.

Before the start of the ceremony, the monks are standing in three rows on either side of the altar facing each other. The Precentor, Celebrant and two assistants enter in procession. The Celebrant approaches the altar to make the customary incense offering, and three senior monks step forward to collect from the altar, respectively, an ornamental platter covered with coloured paper lotus petals, an asperge for sprinkling water and a hand-held incense burner. The three monks then return to their places in the front row to the left of the altar. After offering incense, the Celebrant turns and bows, together

with all monks, as the Precentor strikes a small bell. The Celebrant begins to move and the bell is struck again, the signal for monks to turn either towards or away from the altar and for the dragoning to begin. The diagram below gives a clearer picture of the overall shape and movement of the procession as it proceeds around the Hondo.



During the slow, graceful procession an appropriate scripture such as "The Adoration of the Buddha's Relics" or "The Scripture of Kanzeon Bosatsu" is sung, while behind the Celebrant the flower petals are scattered in all directions, the holy water which the priest has blessed is sprinkled on all sides, and the incense holder moved in a wide, all-embracing arc, the perfumed smoke soon permeating the entire Hondo. When the dragoning brings the Celebrant in front of the altar once more, and the monks back to their original places, the Precentor strikes the bell as the Celebrant and monks turn to face each other. The bell is struck once more and all bow at the same time, the end of the procession being a reflection of the beginning. The Celebrant returns to his usual place and the Precentor recites the Offertory, at the end of which all join in the Three Homages. There is a final incense offering, and three bows conclude the ceremony.

Embedded in this short and uncomplicated form of service there is a richness and variety of Teaching which has been gradually emerging for me during the last two years of training, and all ceremonies, celebrated with an open and believing mind, offer us the same depth of Teaching, if only we are prepared to study in detail what is, in fact, going on.

By taking refuge in the Sangha we choose to train *together* without *interfering* in the training of others, quietly going about our own business, while at the same time remaining open and sympathetic to the needs of our fellow trainees. During the dragoning, we move in a large, clockwise circle, thus demonstrating that we are willing and *eager* to turn the Wheel of the Law in the right direction along with our fellow trainees, and, by taking great care not to get too close or too far away from the person walking in front of us, we acknowledge our responsibility to be always *mindful* of the results of our actions, and to be responsive and considerate to where others are in their training. It is not enough just to feel inside or talk about the Four Wisdoms (Charity, Tenderness, Benevolence, and Sympathy); we must strive to develop and make manifest these spiritual qualities in all our everyday relationships - with those we work with, the objects we use, the food we eat, the animals we look after, the T.V. program we watch, in short, with the personal world we create for ourselves at each and every moment.

There are also smaller movements within the greater circle, and thus it *appears* at times that the monks are moving in opposite directions from each other, but this is only a temporary illusion, which illustrates in a direct and graphic manner the Teaching of the Great and Small circles,<sup>2</sup> and the sensitive

intermarriage of the Real with the Apparent. It is very dangerous to judge another's training even though he may *appear* to be in a complete mess. We are not God, and we see only a minute fragment of the landscape. If we believe that all beings possess the Buddha Nature, then we must learn to sympathize with the humanity of others when they appear to be going wrong in training and moving in a direction different from ourselves, knowing in the stillness of our hearts that the Cosmic Buddha *is* caring for *all his creatures* at all times and in every place. The ceremony cuts through the duality of good/bad, worldly/spiritual, lay-trainee/priest, Master/disciple, while recognizing and emphasizing that we are human and do indeed live in the world. It also teaches that, for our spiritual health and safety, it is imperative to follow the Teaching of the Master in humility and gratitude. At the very moment we feel crushed inside a weak and restricted body, the great and limitless circle of the Buddhas and Ancestors is living and breathing within that very body, at the very centre of that small and narrow circle. Like the sweet dew of the Dharma, Heaven covers the whole earth, and like a needle plunged in water, so does earth penetrate Heaven.

The ceremony not only expresses the Recognition of the Buddha Nature in all things, but also the Transmission of the Dharma. When Roshi Kennett, acting as Celebrant at these ceremonies, turns and begins the dragoning, all the monks immediately follow her. In a short while the circle is complete, with no beginning or end, everyone doing his or her part and everyone *seen* to be fully equal in the eyes of the Lord of the House. The Wheel is joyfully turning and the Truth of the Dharma glorified. The end is in the beginning, and yet we go on. But we are in mortal danger if we proudly or stubbornly refuse to follow in the footsteps of the Master, and ignore the final rule of the Taitaikoho:

For you seniors will always exist; there will always be someone senior to  
you both when you are a first grade unsui and when you become a Buddha.<sup>3</sup>

For although the opposites are transcended and our Buddhahood recognized, the initial humility must never be lost, or hardness and pride will set in to pollute and cloud over the positive signs of one's training. This is why it is so important to *always* listen to the Master, without allowing one's selfish opinions to obscure the Truth, and to learn how to truly *serve* others

The retainer serves his lord  
The emperor; his father does the child  
Obey; without obedience there is  
No filial piety and, if there is  
No service, no advice.  
(The Most Excellent Mirror – Samadhi)

During the dragoning procession, each monk passes by, or crosses, every other monk in the community, including the Master, although during the passing the monks *appear* to be moving in opposite directions. In addition to this, each monk walks the path that the Master has taken, and, of equal significance, the Master walks over the place where each monk has stood. There *is* no separate self. We are also reminded of the words of the Shushogi:

...For they, in the past, were as we are now, and we will be as they in the future.

There is in this a constant, moving recognition of the All is One *and* All is Different. As we slowly pass by our fellow trainees we are silently acknowledging their willingness to train themselves and they

acknowledge the same willingness in us. Living as a true Sangha, we share the myriad twists and turns of training, supporting and encouraging our fellow trainees in their search for the Dharma - together we trace the long and circuitous path of the Ketchimyaku, the unbroken bloodline of the Buddhas and Ancestors. By choosing to train together as Buddhists, willingly and with compassion (for self and others), we also choose to follow the example of Shakyamuni, instead of *indulging* in the ways and means of the world. It is sometimes difficult and painful to go against the accepted standards of society, or more difficult still, the standards of one's family and friends, and the convoluted turning of the procession reflects this. But it also reflects our determination to keep going, on and on, whatever the cost, certain that our faith in the Great Circle of the Buddhas is being strengthened and rewarded with every breath that we take.

After taking the first few steps to start the dragoning, the Celebrant turns and bows to the monk who is following behind, while he, standing at the other corner of the altar, at the same time bows to the Celebrant. This monk then crosses in front of the altar, turns, and bows to the monk following behind *him*, who returns the bow, before crossing in front of the altar, to turn and bow to the monk behind *him*; this pattern, of monk bowing to monk, is repeated throughout the procession, without the least hesitation or exception, so that the accepting and passing on of Roshi Kennett's initial bow is transmitted right down the line. Meanwhile, Roshi Kennett continues on her way, doing her own training. Here, the Master recognizes the spiritual worth of the disciple and is directly and openly transmitting the Buddha-dharma to him, out of her great and enduring compassion. This transmission, like a living flame of love, courses down the entire procession, until the Master eventually completes the circle, arriving at the altar once more to receive and acknowledge the bow of the monk who has just crossed in front of the altar before her - "end and beginning return unto the source." To my mind, this is one of the most beautiful and profound moments in all the ceremonies of the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives, and it actually *shows* us how Zen training works upon us, directly from heart to heart, the Master and disciple sharing a loving partnership in the World of the Dharma.

Throughout the broad, circular movements of the dragoning, there rests a calm centre of stillness, the stillness of meditation, and it is from this centre of peace and stillness deep within us, amidst the tumult of the world, that the true offering is made. A ceremony which lacks this essential spiritual marrow, the offering of merit, *is* but an empty ritual, dull, self-centred, and worldly, and no amount of symbolism, sound, or colour will revive it. Although it is a worthwhile practice to study the form and substance of ceremonies, one should not allow a mere intellectual understanding to satisfy one's search for meaning, but train oneself to express the correct attitude of mind, that of respect and gratitude, in the smallest detail of one's life, by carefully searching the heart so that the *offering* of one's own Buddhist training can breathe true life into the ceremony. This is made clear and emphasized by the offering of flowers, water, and incense during the procession itself.

In the General Offertory 1, it states:

We sincerely pray that the mountain of his/her karma shall vanish and the flowers of the Mind bloom in the springtime of enlightenment. Let us pray that we may all ascend the brilliant altar and realise the Truth.

The many-coloured petals that one of the priests scatters throughout the length and breadth of the Hondo bring to mind those flowers of enlightenment, the exquisite fruits of meditation which indeed are the Four Wisdoms, by which we help all beings to cross over to the other shore.

In the Offertory for the Festival of the Buddha's Birth (Hannamatsuri), it states:

His three hundred sermons are for us as rain is for trees and grass; just as rain causes drooping flowers to flourish so His words touch our heavy hearts; at this very moment the Rain of the Dharma pours into the Lake of Kindness.

And this is *exactly* what is happening during these ceremonies. The sprinkling of the holy water in all the ten directions serves to recall the universal reach of the Dharma, the radiant Teaching which sustains the world and which is always being offered to us, at *this very moment*. It also represents and affirms the Water of the Spirit, or the Flow of Immaculacy, which washes through the core, skin, blood and bones of all things. Our daily efforts in training open us up more and more to the cleansing and bathing in the vibrant warmth of the Lord's love. However, it is not sufficient to make just one act of faith, but countless acts of faith during training, without expecting praise or anticipating future rewards, simply because no other *way of being* makes sense. We train for training's sake.

The Offertory for Segaki contains the following verse:

The Body of the Buddha permeates the universe and manifests itself in front of all of us; there is no place where it does not so manifest itself; it does so for every relationship and in all need yet it is still in its own true place; the seas of its merit cannot be counted.

Body and mind *are* truly one. The delicate perfume of the incense, gently wafted to every corner of the Hondo, and beyond, becomes for us the true reality of Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, which pervades the whole world. The incense-smoke also helps to remind us of the power of meditation to reach into, explore, and excavate the darkest regions of the mind so that we can honestly confront and finally convert our personal store of karma. It is by such a variety of means that a ceremony can clarify and reveal the Teaching, but to avoid its lapsing into a tedious religious exercise, heavy in symbolism but drained of all meaning or merit, the Right Mind of respect and compassion must always be feeding the roots of a ceremony, without which it would wither into ritual.

Up to this point I have concentrated upon certain elements of formal ceremonial which, if properly understood, can deepen our experience of Zen. Before closing, it may be helpful to go beyond the formal aspects of ceremonial and to briefly consider *the ceremony of everyday life*.

Buddhism teaches that *all activity is permeated with pure Zazen*, and this basic truth leads us quite naturally to an understanding of how to make every part of our daily lives into a real ceremony, or to express it another way, how to *sanctify the mundane*. It is dangerous to set ourselves above, or to despise, *anything*. With a correct attitude, pure and aware, it is possible to see and to glorify the Buddha in all that we do and everything that we use - when washing clothes, riding the bus, watching T.V., running a temperature, when feeling bored, or feeling great - the external situation is really not so important. The willingness to look closely at our selfish selves, and, in humility and compassion, do Sange for our past mistakes and sincerely determine not to repeat them is all that it takes. ("*All that it takes!*" I have exclaimed many times, in exasperation and in disbelief, but this is indeed *all that it takes*.)

In the chapter "Do not Stay in Heaven," from *How to Grow a Lotus Blossom*, Roshi Kennett writes:

I must not wander around up here when there is nothing else to do and there is not a ceremony on; if there is no ceremony I must *make* one. Thus I *make* the monk appear.<sup>4</sup>

Any one of us, lay-trainee or priest, can *make* the monk appear - if we really *want* to. Or, on the contrary, we can watch our lives sink deeper into the mud of boredom, complacency, and despair, complaining all the while about the injustice of it all as the grey tide of our karma threatens to engulf us. But after training for some time, the monk *does* appear. He may not be obviously present at all times, and we may not be conscious of the fact, but he *does* appear and our lives, and the lives of others, are thereby simplified and enriched. *To sanctify the mundane*, seeing the Buddha in all things and in all places, whether or not there is a formal ceremony going on, means that our white robes and koromos can be worn on every occasion, and eventually we come to realize the true meaning of the Teaching that *our square clothes are the symbol of enlightenment*. Living from this place, every gassho becomes a smile and the stick of incense is always standing up straight and tall. The mutual offering and the grateful acceptance of respect is the *splendour of charity*, the real and lasting fruit of our meditation.

In conclusion, I would like to quote the following passage from the Russian classic of contemplative prayer, *The Way of a Pilgrim*. This passage reflects very clearly, from a Christian point of view, the theme of this article. The word *prayer* in the following context is, in its most important sense, indistinguishable from our use of the word *meditation*.

Everywhere, wherever you may find yourself, you can set up an altar to God in your mind by means of prayer. And so it is fitting to pray at your trade, on a journey, standing at the counter or sitting at your handicraft. Everywhere and in every place it is possible to pray, and, indeed, if a man diligently turns his attention upon himself, then everywhere he will find convenient circumstances for prayer, if only he is convinced of the fact that prayer should constitute his chief occupation and come before every other duty....He would come to know *from experience*...that it is possible to pray at all times, in all circumstances and in every place, and easily to rise from frequent vocal prayer to prayer of the mind, and from that to prayer of the heart, which *opens up the Kingdom of God within us*.<sup>5</sup>

May we all make the monk appear. *Here and Now*.

#### Notes

1. Described in *The Practice of Chinese Buddhism, 1900-1950*, by Holmes Welch, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 1967, p. 58.
2. See Tozan's Five Ranks for further explanation. One account is found in Charles Luk's *Ch'an and Zen Teaching, Series Two*, Berkeley, Shambala, 1971, Chap. 4.
3. Unless otherwise noted, all quotes appearing in this article are taken from *Zen is Eternal Life*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed., © 1976, by Rev. Roshi Jiyu-Kennett or *The Shasta Abbey Book of Ceremonies*, © 1979.- ed
4. *How to Grow a Lotus Blossom* by Rev. Roshi Jiyu-Kennett, Shasta Abbey Press, 1977, p. 100.
5. *The Way of a Pilgrim*, Tr. R. M. French, New York, Ballantine Books, 1974, p. 148 (italics added).