

Ceremony: Obstacle or Opportunity?

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- Cardiff, Wales -

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This year sees the tenth anniversary of the Cardiff Serene Reflection Meditation Group. Over the years quite a few people have visited the Group, many coming only a few times, others staying longer but moving because of work changes and the like, while others are still with us. Some, in particular, came for a time but left as the group began to mature and as we also started to do more ceremonies. From discussions we had, it appeared that some members were very keen on sitting meditation (or *zazen*, as we called it in those days) but they didn't see the point of ceremonies. I could sympathise with that view, since I first came into contact with Zen back in 1973 through a well-known book about Soto Zen which had a profound effect on me and led me to practise meditation; though ceremonial was mentioned from time to time in the book, the emphasis was on "just sitting" and attaining enlightenment experience (*kensho*).

I first visited Throssel Hole Priory in 1979 and subsequently went on a weekend retreat with the Lancaster group. Some short time later I moved down to Cardiff and lost touch with Throssel until 1987, though all this time still practising meditation. Such a brief encounter with the ceremonial had only led to a kind of "hmm, interesting" view of it. I did remember I had enjoyed chanting the Ancestral Line.

1987 saw my wife Joyce's first contact with Throssel and my renewed contact, at a weekend retreat. This was followed some weeks after by The Ten Precepts Meeting (Jukai). That week was inspirational and I found the ceremonial fascinating. Everything went fine for a while after Jukai, then the initial novelty and fascination began to wear off and I found myself starting to question the practice, particularly the ceremonial side of things. The meditation was fine, often hard work, but that was expected. I liked the monastery and the monks, got a lot out of the dharma talks, but was giving myself a really hard time with the ceremonial. In particular I got to dread Morning Service. Midday Service was passable since it dealt with sitting meditation and Vespers seemed a pleasant and relatively harmless thing to do before going to sleep. But Morning Service was something to survive. At that time we started with the *Scripture of Avalokiteswara Bodhisattva (Kanzeon Bosatsu)*, which seemed to drag on for ever. I would find myself flipping the pages to see how far we had got, and I found the archaic language difficult to relate to, to say the least. *Sandokai* was for some reason OK and then there was the seemingly interminable *Most Excellent Mirror, Samadhi*; back to the yawns and flipping the pages. I seemed to be the only one who yawned their way through it, or was still in *gassho* when no one else was and wasn't when everyone else was. This was a difficult time for me and particularly for Joyce, as I moaned and complained and drove her up the wall. Should I stay or should I find another tradition which didn't emphasise ceremonial? I didn't want to go since I liked Throssel and the people there, but it felt dishonest to be staying when I was obviously such a square peg in a round hole. Joyce told me to ring up Throssel and talk to someone. I wouldn't or couldn't. With hindsight I think I was scared they would say "yes, it's time to move on" and I didn't want to!

One piece of advice I did take from Joyce was to get on my cushion and sit with it and ask for help. (She can be a real bully when it comes to it.) Seriously though, when you don't know what to do and have gone round and round in your head for so long, then it is the only thing to do. Genuinely

asking for help always brings a response. In this case it was a beginning of seeing where the problem was. I was separating the things that I saw as useful from those I didn't see as useful. Sitting meditation, working meditation and dharma talks were useful, ceremonies weren't. It was that simple. In other words there was meditation and there were ceremonies, or there were things that had meaning and there were things that didn't. I began to see that if I could try to treat ceremonies as another period of meditation then things might improve. It still felt a bit artificial, but it was a start. This coincided with a weekend retreat to which I had finally decided to go. Having got there I knew it was time to talk to someone, so I put my name down for spiritual counseling. I think I spent most of that weekend working out how I would explain the problem. Anyway, in I went and tentatively described it. I waited. Smilingly I was told, "Classic symptoms". What, I was normal, not a failure? I didn't have to leave? I was given some advice on how to carry on and I stumbled out in a bit of a daze. I could stay! Once it had sunk in, I bounced along and enjoyed the rest of the weekend. Joyce breathed a sigh of relief.

It wasn't the end of the problem, but it was an opening. I could treat the ceremonies as a meditation period, but they still didn't, as I saw it then, have much meaning for me. This idea of things having meaning or not having meaning is a bit of a tricky one. What do we mean by meaning? For example, if, as many people find, ceremonies are enjoyable, does this give meaning? Not necessarily so. Very often we think of things having meaning in terms of some kind of contract, of having some kind of return. We do things in the expectation that there will be some return or benefit. At least that is how I saw it then. It is similar to how we view meaning or purpose in everyday life. Often if we are having a good time or things are going our way we think that life has meaning or purpose. But what about when life is difficult; when we are ill or when relationships are not going as we wish? Too often meaning or purpose has more to do with how well we are distracted from the pain and dissatisfactions of life. So, can life have meaning or in particular can ceremonies have meaning?

From my own experience I find that it is actually the question that is the problem. I find with ceremonies, for example, that it boils down to whether or not I truly participate. Here I am using participate not just as being in the room and passively going through the motions or even avoiding trying to take part, but an active letting go of opinions and likes or dislikes. If we are not careful we get into a form of discriminatory mind in which there is us and there is the ceremony and there is a gap between the two. We need somehow to bridge the gap. By letting go of opinions, likes and dislikes, etc., in other words by opening up to the mind of meditation, the gap can be bridged and then, as it says in the *Scripture of Great Wisdom*, the obstacles dissolve and we can then truly participate. When I am able to do that, the problem of meaning just disappears—in fact the question becomes meaningless. For most of us, certainly for me, this is not something that needs to be done once, but continuously; then slowly but surely the participation becomes more real and that which we found difficult can become a source of pleasure. Gradually over the years, participation in ceremonial has led me not only to a deeper understanding of the words but also to a deepening enjoyment of the ceremonies. I now find the *Scripture of Avalokiteswara Bodhisattva* very inspiring.

Learning to participate in ceremonies also helps in dealing with the problem of meaning in everyday life; the process is the same. If we can let go of the separation between us and that which we are doing, the obstacles dissolve and life becomes less of a struggle than it might be otherwise. I find that there are times when I can do it easily and times when everything seems to be wrong. However by recognising the problem I can slowly but surely start to move beyond seeing whatever is going on as a problem. Has life meaning? Yes, but we don't find it by looking for answers externally. We need only truly participate and the question can then be seen to be meaningless. As a physicist/engineer it reminds

me of the 18th century scientists who believed in the existence of a substance called *phlogiston*. All combustible substances were supposed to be made up of phlogiston, which was thought to escape during burning, leaving behind the ash. It was thought that by putting phlogiston back into the ash it would be possible to restore the original substance. A lot of effort went into trying to find something that didn't exist. Similarly, at the end of the 19th century and into this century, much effort was made by scientists to find the ether (aether) which was thought to be needed as a medium to allow electromagnetic waves such as light and radiowaves to propagate. It is now regarded as an unnecessary assumption. I have come to view looking for meaning in the same way as phlogiston or the aether—don't bother.

I still find myself yawning in Morning Service but from tiredness, not boredom, and I still find I miss the incense offering signals from time to time (though, as I can't help but notice, I'm not the only one!). If, as I used to, you have problems with ceremonies, get involved in them at your meditation group, priory or monastery. It makes the participation that much more real if you know why the precentor rings a particular gong, or why the incense offering is the way it is. Ask if you can learn to do the incense offering, be precentor or be timekeeper for meditation periods. Become an active participant, not a passive observer. What for me started off as a big obstacle gradually turned into many opportunities for training. Obstacle—Opportunity? In the end, is there really a difference?