

All of Everyday Life Is a Ceremony of Gratitude.

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It seems that it is not uncommon in the life of a trainee to come upon a teaching that shakes and disturbs, that embodies Truth and points us to It in a way that leaps beyond language, beyond understanding and beyond the illusion of a fixed point we mistake for our True Selves. Such teachings can be the catalyst or transportation we need to bypass our brains, our ideas of what we know or don't know, and our long-cherished delusions to catch a glimpse of something much deeper. The title of this article, found five years ago while thumbing through Rev. Master's *The Wild, White Goose, Vol. II*,¹ has been a lodestone and inspiration for me since then in ways I have never understood. This article is an exploration of a few of the expanding ripples it has made in my life. I offer it in the hope that its ripples may be felt by others.

Is all of everyday life a ceremony of gratitude? What exactly is meant by this? My guess is that most people (I include myself in all of my generalizations) experience most of daily life most of the time as pretty ordinary stuff. We get up, do what needs to be done, maybe have a little treat or fun along the way and then go to bed. Where is the ceremony? Where is the gratitude? Is what is being pointed at contriving ceremonies, trying to drum up gratitude? At the heart of this statement, "All of everyday life is a ceremony of gratitude," lies "ceremony." For me, a key to unlocking this teaching is to examine what the word "ceremony" might be referring to. I will restrict exploration of ceremonial to formal religious ceremonies as are encountered at Shasta Abbey and are common to most, if not all, religious paths. I will primarily draw upon my experience of ceremonies at Shasta Abbey and what is currently apparent about them to me. This is not an attempt to be complete.

Everyone comes to Buddhist training with a different set of experiences, attitudes and a gut sense of what religious ceremonial is. Our families and Western society have mostly exposed us to non-Buddhist religious traditions (my family being devoutly atheistic) that heavily influence our ability to comprehend the purpose of and fully enter into ceremonial. For many people, to undertake meditation and training seriously requires that at some point they allow the buried memories and consequences of early religious educations, both coarse and subtle, to surface and be embraced, however painful that might be. Parts of our lives we firmly closed the door on when we left our parents' control have a way of reopening on their own as training starts and deepens. The Abbey's ceremonies are particularly good at triggering these old feelings, as we use so many Western religious Invocations, music that for many of us is part and parcel of our religious upbringing. ("Oh no, hymn books, stand up and sit down, sing-a-long, —Ahhhh!") As I look back, I was doing well in the beginning to just sit still while wild and unpleasant feelings and thoughts arose during ceremonies. As I continued to meditate, this tended to subside over time as the karmic consequences of my early experiences were cleaned up and as the point of ceremonial became clearer.

Webster's dictionary (dictionaries often being a good source of culture-bound understanding) boldly states one of two prevalent, and not so helpful, attitudes towards ceremonial that are commonly inherited by growing up in our society. They offer the following as one definition of ceremony: "an action performed only formally with no deep significance."² Here we have half of a common set of opposites about ceremony. The first, which is the attitude I started with, could be summed up as "It is all empty ritual, hocus-pocus mumbo-jumbo superstition." Its companion opposite could read as "These

are magical, ancient sounds and gestures, and if we do them just right, amazing things will happen." Although I do not claim to understand anything fully, my experience up until now points to my attitude being the crucial factor in ceremonial and not the external form's inherent power or lack thereof. At times I have made ceremonies an empty ritual by indulging in a downward-looking, skeptical attitude; and at other times I have made them (or more accurately, allowed them to be) a vehicle of devotion and reverence by approaching them with a bright and positive attitude. It is my choice.

At its core, a ceremony is moving meditation, stillness within activity. It serves as a model for how to act from our center and within the Precepts for the twenty-three or so hours a day we are not doing formal meditation. It is a bridge between this serene reflection and the usual course of daily life, when we often have to negotiate multiple needs, more sense stimuli and complex interactions with other people. For training to really take hold, I have found that my willingness to do moving meditation must grow, as opening up to the Eternal is possible and needed throughout the day. For this purpose, doing formal ceremonies regularly has been invaluable for me for strengthening the habit of meditating in daily life. In fact, everyday life and religious ceremonial resemble each other more than I usually think. The proverbial Martian observer of humans would likely note the routineness of our lives, sometimes referred to as the "daily grind." We get up at the same time, do the same activities (washing, dressing, eating) in the same order, drive to work the same way, shop at the same stores, see the same people, etc., etc. This same observer might wonder what significance lies within this repetition, and also the obviously special (sacred?) objects such as the automobile, television and coffee maker. In daily ceremonies we sit, walk and bow the same way each time, sing the same Scriptures and have objects (incense boxes, statues) that we pay special attention to. Formal daily religious ceremonies can be seen as a boiled down version of the sameness of everyday life. As such, they can help us to train within this sameness and the reactions it can trigger: some of mine being boredom, restlessness, acting on "autopilot" and craving for novelty and stimulation. A few aspects of how ceremonies help me deepen moving meditation have become clearer recently.

Buddhism teaches that we create karma, both the karma that increases momentum towards suffering (often called "bad karma") and the karma that increases momentum towards Enlightenment ("good karma") by volitional use of our body, speech and mind. It also teaches that the use of our will (volition or choice) is one of the five aggregates (*skandhas*-Sanskrit) that humans are composed of. Hence, creating one kind of karma or another is inescapable, whether we know and like it or not. This is both a sobering and joyful fact when deeply accepted: sobering because the responsibility for our karma rests with us at each moment; joyful because well used, our choices will move us towards Enlightenment. During formal meditation, it is hard to create much karma of suffering with our bodies and speech as we sit still and do not talk. Our energy is directed more at embracing and training with our minds, allowing thoughts, feelings, memories, etc., to quiet down naturally by not holding on to or pushing them away. In contrast to formal meditation, during a ceremony, as in most moving meditation, we are called upon to use our bodies (bowing, making gassho), speech (chanting Scriptures) and minds (not drifting off, remembering to go right instead of left, etc.). As with daily life, this presents a more complex situation and a wider array of chances for falling from the razor's edge or increasing the karma of suffering than pure meditation does. A ceremony gives us a short, intense opportunity to train with body, speech and mind within the mirror of meditation without quite as many distractions and seemingly competing demands of daily life. It is the one place we really try to do moving meditation.

To do both pure meditation and a True Ceremony requires that I use all three karma-producing

faculties wholeheartedly in the direction of Enlightenment. From this perspective, I have found the emphasis placed in ceremonies on the "correct" use of the body (palms in gassho firmly together, not letting one's eyes drift around the ceremony hall) and speech (no extraneous talking, putting effort into our singing) is not a slavish concern for uniformity, but a priceless chance to engage in a religious act willingly: letting go of this illusion of self and its myriad opinions and judgments about how things "ought" to be and what it wants to do. If I am not willing to try and be wholehearted and bright during a ceremony, not indulging sloth ("I am too tired to sit up straight") or boredom ("I cannot believe we are singing this again") or thoughts ("I wonder what is for breakfast? Boy, pancakes would be great! Now if I were cooking..."), how will I manage throughout the day as karmically charged lures present themselves and choices need to be made? From the perspective of self, ceremonial is uncomfortably restrictive with "me," "my" and "mine" being de-emphasized. Ceremonial is religious training; it is the bringing of meditation to bear on our every action; it is the classroom where I can learn to train my mind and body.

Ceremonies serve as a model for enlightened action in daily life within its prescribed nature. When done wholeheartedly, with our bodies we naturally express dignity, respect, reverence and gratitude in how we walk, make gassho and bow. Our speech is wise by reciting some of the most distilled, yet accessible, teaching that Buddhism has. We are as present, bright and willing as we can manage. The seeming paradox is that a ceremony's words and actions are not something I create, so how can they help me in my daily life when I cannot rely on the ceremonial form for choosing what to say and do? How does it serve as a model for enlightened action? For me, the key to both is letting go of this illusion of self and getting out of the way of the natural flow of the Buddha Nature. The further I go in training the less I feel that compassionate, loving or wise actions are in any sense mine, something "I" produce or possess. When I meditate during a ceremony or in other aspects of daily life, I can become a pipeline of That Which Is. I do not own the compassion or wisdom inherent in these ceremonial forms, or what comes from living from my spiritual center in daily life. But when I wholeheartedly offer myself to a ceremony or to other forms of moving meditation, I can dwell within the Truth of the Eternal, whether I know it or not. I have to be willing to be still, let go of formulas and preconceptions, trust my meditation and act. Ceremonial points to the necessity of, and lets us practice, having faith and taking refuge in meditation while we negotiate daily life. As our lives of training move from turning the stream of compassion within (pure meditation) to without (pure moving meditation), and back again, the daily touchstones such as morning service, mealtime ceremonial and evening service offer rich opportunities to bridge the going in and out, to keep the Wheel of the Dharma turning in the direction of Enlightenment.

A discovery I found remarkable was that in Joseph Shipley's *Dictionary of Word Origins*, it gives the Latin word "caerimonia" (rite) and the Sanskrit word "karma" as the origins of "ceremony." Mr. Shipley's offering as to the connection between karma and ceremony, quoted in full here, is as follows:

.. karma, act, work, developed into the idea of the ethical consequence of one's acts. "It is well to behave according to thought-out procedure, when (according to the principle of karma) all one's acts have their inevitable consequence in one's own future."³

This cryptic explanation seems to suggest that the etymological root of "ceremony" is close to the teaching that has arisen for me in response to the title of this article, and to the point I have tried to

make above. (Though I would substitute "in accordance with our deepest nature" for "according to thought-out procedure.") Making karma is an inescapable fact of our lives; ceremonies embody this truth and show us how to live wisely within it.

Returning to the statement that this article is exploring, I saw that all of everyday life is not only a ceremony, but a ceremony of gratitude. At first it appeared that what this meant is that when living from our True Home, life becomes as a ceremony and we are filled with gratitude. Later I was pointed towards a more basic and vital truth about training.

In fact, the statement that "All of everyday life is a ceremony of gratitude" is not saying that we will always feel gratitude when we truly enter the ceremony of daily life, but that we will be expressing gratitude, whether we feel it or not. The ceremonies at the Abbey, by their use of body and speech, have us naturally expressing gratitude, again whether we feel it or not. In the ceremony of daily life we express gratitude naturally by wholeheartedly doing and saying what needs to be done and said, whether we feel grateful or not. In the same way, sitting down to do formal meditation expresses wisdom, even if nothing particularly wise is passing through our minds. Meditation expresses our intuitive knowledge and faith (however strong or weak we might judge it to be) that there is the Eternal and that through our efforts we can and will come to know and live from that place. This is great wisdom. We can express this gratitude and wisdom whether we are filled with joy or whether we are so depressed we can hardly move, if we are willing to make the effort to be wholehearted. Gratitude as a feeling exists as the karmic consequence of truly letting go of self and taking refuge in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. Gratitude is expressed in the natural flow of our Buddha Nature when it is unobstructed by our craving and attachments. In speaking of gratitude, Great Master Dogen wrote: "You must show it truly, in the only real way, in your daily life; our daily life should be spent constantly in selfless activity with no waste of time whatsoever."⁴ In the unhindered flow of meditation and training, gratitude is both felt and expressed completely naturally, usually without great fanfare. We can then see that literally "All things must be given, all things offered at all times and in all places."⁵

This wisdom and gratitude is integral to every formal ceremony done at the Abbey. I have found it important that the offertories at the end of ceremonies do not say, "We take the merit generated by this Scripture recitation for ourselves so that we may personally benefit." No. All ceremonies offer the merit (karma in the direction of Enlightenment) to others out of gratitude. Even the merit from so ordinary an act as brushing one's teeth is offered to others, not because we are necessarily especially wonderful and generous people, but because this is how our True Life, our Buddha Nature is, and the tide of our training pulls us into harmony with it. In the tooth-brushing ceremony we recite:

I take this tooth-brush so that all living things may profit; May
they understand the Truth quickly and become naturally pure.

I find it helpful to remember that I am among the above "all living beings" who need help, not some separate, special person hoping others will get it together. In the "All is One," there is no separate self to give or receive blessings. The offertories remind us of the selfless generosity born of gratitude that comes from doing a True Ceremony.

In a last look at the source of this article, I note that it says that all of everyday life is a ceremony of gratitude, not that it could be or would be if I only would do such and such or if I were a

better person. Why? Because no matter how neglected, dirty and cluttered with junk my house seems to be, it is still perfect and exquisitely immaculate now; it always was and always will be. No matter how weighted down with ignorance and attachment I might feel myself to be, this very load has not ever been separate from the Eternal. That I may at times be oblivious to the unceasing opportunities to say YES to That Which Is in this ceremony we call life, changes its reality and perfection not one iota. I need not be a different person or in a different place to be the celebrant of my ceremony.

"All of everyday life is a ceremony of gratitude" still directs me to the elemental and profound truth that at each moment I can allow myself to be in harmony with the will of the Universe or not. It reminds me that in being in harmony or not, I will create karma and I will get the consequences. This truth is a cornerstone in the foundation of serene reflection meditation. It is the reason that meditation is the well to which we return over and over to bring our will into accord with that greater will. "Pure meditation must be done."⁷ This teaching continues to lead me to the selfless dignity, beauty, reverence, grace, love, gratitude, willingness, joy, compassion, generosity and wisdom that comprise all of our deepest birthright, and that are found within all of our everyday life.

The ceremony is happening now. We are using our will now. We are reaping the consequences of earlier ceremonies now. We live within the compassionate embrace of the Universe now. May we drop our obstructions and allow the ceremony to flow.

Notes.

1. Rev. P. T. N. H. Jiyu-Kennett, Roshi, *The Wild, White Goose, Vol. II* (Mt. Shasta, California: Shasta Abbey, 1978), p. 46.
2. *Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary*, s.v. "ceremony."
3. Joseph T. Shipley, Ph.D., *Dictionary of Word Origins* (Ames, Iowa: Littlefield, Adams & Co., 1955), p. 75.
4. Great Master Dogen, *Shushogi (What is Truly Meant by Training and Enlightenment)* in *Zen is Eternal Life*, 3rd ed. rev. by Roshi P. T. N. H. Jiyu-Kennett (Mt. Shasta, California: Shasta Abbey Press, 1987), p. 163.
5. Rev. Master Jiyu-Kennett, *Kyojukaimon and Commentary* [*Kyojukaimon* by Great Master Keizan] in *Serene Reflection Meditation* (Mt. Shasta, California: Shasta Abbey, 1989), p. 75.
6. Dogen, "Bendoho" ("How to Train in Buddhism") in Jiyu-Kennett, *Zen is Eternal Life*, p. 116.
7. *Rules for Meditation*. See *The Liturgy of the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives for the Laity*, comp. Jiyu-Kennett, p. 99.