

I was happy to hear you had a rich discussion about our forms and rituals last week facilitated by Chris and Raizelah.

Tonight I want to focus on the complex set of activities we almost always do during a practice time called "service." Some of us are used to that word standing for bowing and chanting in harmony together but it's interesting that that word has become the word. Service. Maybe as we're in service to the beings we dedicate the merit of our practice to. We're doing them a service. Perhaps.

Scholars tell us that our Zen ritual is a combination of Buddhist ritual practices from the later period of Buddhism in India and a complex existing set of rituals in Confucian China. Buddhism landed in China in waves from the 5th to about the 9th centuries. So gassho is a version of the Indian "namaskar" but the focus on ancestors in a line of transmission is Confucian Chinese. I'm sure Indian Buddhist had the idea of who their teachers were and might well have a primary teacher but without the emphasis on "my teacher". Maybe more like having a favorite professor. And in fact lots of Buddhist training in India happened in the great monastic universities like Nalanda.

We tend to make in our minds a distinction between rituals we do and other stuff we do together. Maybe we make a distinction between "practice" and "ritual".

Interestingly in Japanese Buddhism there aren't separate words. One word: "gyoji" stands for all the things the monks do. Here's the scholar T. Griffith Foulk on this:

I translate "gyoji" as "observances," but that term encompasses a very broad range of activities that Zen clergy engage in, some of which we might prefer to call "ceremonies," "procedures," "etiquette," "training," "study," "meditation," "work," or the "ritual sacralization of everyday activities" (such as eating, sleeping, and bathing).

And as I've mentioned before life in the Zen monastery - the source material from which what we do here has been adapted - is incredibly

prescribed, scripted, ritualized. There are particular ways you do everything and that particularity is very physical. The way you hold you body, use your hands, which way you turn, which foot you use to cross the threshold.

Here's another excerpt from Professor Foulk about how ritualized it all is:

Approaching the grand entrance to Eihei-ji, one of Japan's premier Zen Buddhist temples, I am both excited and intimidated. I understand that once I enter this gate, every moment of my life for the next three days will be subsumed under the disciplinary structures of Zen ritual. Although I have already trained in the ritual procedures of the Sōtō school, this is the head temple of its founder, the renowned master Dogen, and I realize how exacting and demanding their adherence to proper ritual will be. Upon entrance, along with a handful of other lay people who have accepted the challenge of this brief meditation retreat, I am given specific instructions on how to conduct myself through virtually every moment of my stay. The details seem endless and excruciatingly difficult to master—how, exactly, to enter the meditation hall, to address the teacher, to bow, to hold one's bowl while engaging in mealtime rituals, and on and on. Where best to draw the mental line between actual Zen ritual and other procedural routines of the Zen monastery baffles me. But virtually all life in a Zen monastery is predetermined, scripted, and taken out of the domain of human choice. Some of these routinized life activities stand out from others as explicit religious ritual by virtue of their obvious sanctity, by their relation to the founding myths or stories of the Zen tradition, and more. But all the routines of the Zen setting appear to be treated as essential to the life of Zen, and all life appears to be ritualized in some sense. Now instructed in proper ritual procedure, my brief immersion in Zen monastic life begins.

And here I want to drop in a little announcement. I've started the wheels turning for a possible sangha visit to Japan that will definitely include going to Eihei-ji ourselves. Mark your calendars for the first half

of May 2024. There's also a really beautiful looking hiking pilgrimage I hope we'll get to do plus other temple visting. If we're lucky we'll get to visit Rinso-in the temple that Suzuki Roshi left in the hands of his son Hoitsu in 1959 to come to America now run by an older Hoitsu, his son Shungo, and their wives Chitose and Kumi. It's such an honor to get to go and visit with them so I hope that works out. Plus temple touring in Kyoto which is such an amazing city full of temples. Maybe we'll get to visit one of the sacred mountains: Mount Hiei where Dogen ordained and/or Mount Koya which is the headquarters for the Shingon Buddhism of our friend Taijo iin Seattle is the priest.

The thing that's strange about Zen is that when it was introduced to the west at first it sounded like Zen was just strange logic, incredible spontaneity, and meditation. Zen wasn't presented as a religion full of ritual and proscribed behavior at all. There's a whole interesting history around why that happened but it was a total misrepresentation of how Zen is actually practiced in Japan. While there are for sure moments of creativity and spontaneity even those are happening against a backdrop of many many many hours of doing things exactly the way they're always done.

But actually that worked out well. The wild philosophical Zen of Alan Watts and DT Suzuki appealed to American radicals, beats, and hippies. Got them excited and interested. And apparently that excitement created enough momentum for get over the hump when they did meet one of the few Zen teachers in America who didn't do wild and crazy things but had them sit down and follow their breath, learn how to bow, and chat sutras in Sino Japanese.

Like one of these wild koans about cutting cats in two or fingers. Probably those never literally happened but when we read those scenes and contemplate the powerful dharma messages of non-duality they point to it helps to feel into the truth. I think we can also understand the verbal koans as very unusual moments in the monastery that really caught everyone's attention and became a memorable story. Like this story about the master Zhaozhou:

Because a monk asked Zhaozhou, "This beginner has newly entered the jungle. I beg teacher to instruct."

Zhou said, "Have you finished eating the rice gruel?"

The monk said, "I have finished eating the rice gruel."

Zhou said, "Wash your alms bowl and go."

This monk had insight.

It was probably very rare for a new monk even have an audience with the abbot much less have the courage to ask him anything at all. These were extremely formal little societies. You didn't really speak unless spoken to.

I remember our guide monk when we were at Eiheiiji saying that he's recently been in one of the formal question and answer rituals with the abbot there. It was clearly he'd never gotten to talk to the abbot informally. Usually the ritual is all scripted. The monks memorize the proper questions and the teacher gives the proper answer. They are more of a ritual of recitation than what we would call questions and answers. But this time the abbot said something unexpected! He said he'd been thinking about this for years. I asked him if he'd ever gotten to ask the abbot more about what he meant and he just looked at me shocked. Clearly that wasn't going to happen.

So that's our actual tradition. We've loosened it up a lot in the West. And of course have our biased sense of cultural superiority and think that it's much better to have our own voices and ask our own questions, but I wonder if that's all it's cracked up to be.

What can we learn from engaging more deeply in ritual than that. From really giving up our selves and merging into the way it's done. And we do that together. That sense of one body.

Anyway service starts with an offering. This seems to be from the Buddhist side more than the Confucian side. Early Buddhism passed down from Buddha's day includes verses for making offerings:

Traditional chants in Pali, when offering lit candles (padīpa pūjā) and incense (sugandha pūjā) to an image of the Buddha are - this translated from Pali.

With lights brightly shining  
Abolishing this gloom  
I adore the Enlightened One,  
The Light of the three worlds.

With perfumed incense  
And fragrant smoke  
I worship the Exalted One,  
Who is great and worthy of worship.[15]

In the places this style of Buddhism is happening now, Thailand, Myanmar, they most likely chant these in Pali instead of in Thai or Malay or Burmese or whatever the local language is. Kind of like our chanting some things in Sino Japanese or the Catholic priests chanting in High Latin.

Similarly, a traditional Pali incense-lighting verse speaks of the Buddha's "fragrant body and fragrant face, fragrant with infinite virtues." [16]

Sometimes there's a clear dharma message in these invocations:

By contemplating on an offering, one tangibly sees life's impermanence (Pali: anicca), one of the three characteristics of all things upon which the Buddha encouraged his disciplines to recollect. For instance, the end of a traditional chant in Pali, when offering flowers (puppha pūjā) to an image of the Buddha is:

I worship the Buddha with these flowers;  
May this virtue be helpful for my emancipation;  
Just as these flowers fade,  
Our body will undergo decay.[17]

I remember learning early on that it's a good idea to let the flowers on the altar wilt a bit. Don't be too quick to freshen up. Remember birth and death.

The idea behind all Buddhist ritual is that it generates merit. This is a concept that has a bit of a harder time making it across to our Western Scientific Materialist framework. Merit is good energy that we generate doing rituals like service and within the ritual there's the power to direct that energy.

Directing that energy is a practice of generosity - of dana. It would be greedy to generate a lot of ritual in ceremony and keep it for ourselves. So that's why later in service the kokyo - the chant leader - proclaims where we're sending the merit. To Buddhas, to ancestors, to suffering beings, to all beings. We spread it out far and wide.

That's why it makes perfect sense to give food to the monks when they come through your village on their alms round. It's an exchange. The generosity of giving food and the generosity of making merit for all.

So first we make offerings which generate merit. While I'm offering incense I usually say in my mind a formulaic statement of devotion and a spontaneous wish.

Namu kei butsu, namu kei ho, namu kei so  
May this evening of practice bring peace and insight.

The first part is homage to buddha, dharma, and sangha in Sino Japanese. That got into my bones from sewing the okesa. Whenever we do the ritual of sewing Buddha's robe we take refuge with every stitch. Usually the instruction is just the first part "namu kei butsu" "Homage I give to Buddha" but when I was making the thousands of stitches in my first okesa I guess I wanted more variety or a fuller ritual so I include "namu kei ho" - "homage to dharma" - and "namu kei so" - "homage to sangha".

And then I just say to myself whatever comes around what I hope this time of practice will bring. Peace. Understanding. Clarity. Comfort. Different things come up.

There's a traditional Zen chant for incense offering which I don't usually do - it's

Sila, samadi, vimoksha incense Radiant light of the buddhas emits throughout the dharma world Homage to all buddhas in the ten directions Permeates into seeing and hearing and manifests nirvana.

And then with the formal ringing of bells we all make an offering of something very precious to us: our bodies. That's what the ritual of prostrations is. Offering the body to Buddha. In my last talk I told an apocryphal story about that being being a reference to the Buddha before he was the Buddha offering his long hair as a way for the Buddha of that time, Dipankara Buddha, to cross a muddy stream in the road. Offered his hair and held up his hands to receive the feet of the Buddha.

Prostrations are a core practice in Zen for sure. Suzuki Roshi said his teacher did prostrations so much there was a callous on his forehead from it. That's really going for it.

And Dogen has an essay about the depth and importance of prostrations called Raihai Tokuzui which means something like "by prostrating, receive the marrow" the marrow being the deep stuff. So by offering our bodies we receive the deepest truth.

Interestingly this is also the famous essay where Dogen is right on about women. Promoting them as fully capable of enlightenment and worthy of being fully included in practice. The connection between bowing and women's rights isn't very clear to me in this essay. Perhaps once Dogen started thinking about making raihi - doing prostrations he started thinking about bodies and had a big "wait a minute!" moment around discriminating against women's bodies.

He tells some of the few recorded stories of great Zen women in Raihai Tokuzui. Here's one:

Nun Miaoxin was a student of Yangshan. When Yangshan was looking for someone to fill the position of the director of the guesthouse at the foot of Mount Yangshan, he asked his senior students, who had served as officers, to make a recommendation. After some discussion, Yangshan said, "Although Miaoxin is a woman, she has heroic aspiration. She should be suited to serve as the director of the guesthouse."

Everyone agreed, and Miaoxin was appointed to the position. None of Yangshan's other students resented the decision. As it was not a minor position, those who recommended Miaoxin were careful about this selection.

While Miaoxin filled this position, there was a group of seventeen monks from Shu, in the west, who were on the road in search of a master. On their way to climb up to Yangshan's monastery, they stopped and stayed at the guesthouse. While they rested in the evening, they discussed the story about the wind and the banner of Huineng, High Ancestor of Caoxi. The seventeen monks' interpretations were all wrong.

Miaoxin, who overheard the discussion outside the room, said, "How wasteful! How many pairs of straw sandals have these seventeen blind donkeys worn out? They haven't even dreamed of buddha dharma."

Her assistant worker told them that Miaoxin had not approved their understanding. Instead of being upset with her disapproval, the monks were ashamed of their lack of understanding. They got formally dressed, offered incense, bowed, and asked her to teach.

Miaoxin said, "Come closer."



When the seventeen monks were still getting closer, Miaoxin said, “It is not that wind flaps. It is not that the banner flaps. It is not that your mind flaps.”

Hearing her words, all seventeen monks had realization. They thanked her and formally became her students. Soon after, they went back to Shu without climbing up to Yangshan’s monastery. Indeed, this is nothing the bodhisattvas of three classes or ten stages can come up with. It is work transmitted by buddha ancestors from heir to heir.

Thus, even nowadays when the position of abbot or head monk is not filled, you should request a nun who has attained dharma to assume the position. However aged or senior a monk may be, what’s the use of someone who has not attained the way? The master of an assembly should be a person of a clear eye.

Today a nun stays in monasteries of Great Song. When the attainment of dharma by one of them is acknowledged and she is appointed abbess of a nunnery by the government, she ascends the teaching seat in the monastery where she is staying. All monks, including the abbot, assemble, stand, and listen to her dharma discourse. Some monks ask questions. This has been the custom since ancient times.

And later he makes some very direct statements about honoring women. Here are a few:

Those who are extremely stupid think that women are merely the objects of sexual desire and treat women in this way. The Buddha’s children should not be like this. If we discriminate against women because we see them merely as objects of sexual desire, do we also discriminate against all men for the same reason?

And then goes further. Not only is it dumb to discriminate against women because you think they're defiled it's dumb to have aversion or believe in the idea of defilement about anything:

For the cause of defilement, men can be the object, women can be the object, those who are neither men nor women can be the object, phantoms and flowers of emptiness can be the object. There were those who were trapped by impure conduct while looking at images on water or gazing at the sun. Gods can be the objects, demons can be the objects. We cannot finish counting all the causes of impure conduct. It is said that there are eighty-four thousand objects. Do we not look at them or discard them all?

Pretty impressive for 13th century Tokugawa Japan.

In my initial research for the Japan trip I learned that there main monastic training center for the mountain monk tradition - Yamabushi is along one of the trails where I hope we get to go. The Yamabushi are what the monks of the Shugendo religion are called. Interestingly "bushi" is another word for prostrations and yama is "mountain" so they are mountain prostration monks. They do hiking and marathon running in the mountains with a zillion ritual stops at little shrines and important places where spirits dwell and austere practices like standing under waterfalls. Inspirations for our wilderness dharma program. Anyway their central temple of Ōminesan-ji is in the mountains along one of the more challenging trails in the Kii Peninsula where I hope we'll get to go. So I got all excited: cool, maybe we could go visit and get their via a challenging hike and meet the Yamabushi! And then I read that it's one of the few remaining religious areas in Japan that's still off limits to women. Most of the rest have since reformed that terrible practice. Bummer.

Anyway here's what Dogen said about this 900 years ago:

There is one ridiculous custom in Japan. This is called a “secluded area” or “a Mahayana practice place,” where nuns and laywomen are not allowed to enter. This crooked custom has been going on for a long time, and people do not think about it. Those who study ancient teachings do not try to change it. Those who study extensively do not question it.

This custom is sometimes advocated as the avatar's establishment or the ancient sage's style, without being challenged. If we laughed about it, our stomachs would be exhausted.

So there's a bit of an exploration with many side roads about the beginning of service. Making offerings at the altar and doing prostrations.

What are your thoughts or questions? There is sooo much you can say on this topic of ritual and religion and practice and all of it.