

I'd like to explore our chanting a little more tonight. A few bits and pieces here I've mentioned before but much is new.

It turns out there are two basic forms of chanting in the Japanese tradition: shomyo and dokkyo.

Mostly we do dokkyo - sutra chanting - pretty much monorhythmic - a single steady beat - and almost monotonal but not quite, there's a little variation. When we say "Japanese chanting" around here that's what we mean.

Shomyo is a lot more complex. The one common example in our practice here is the "sung part" of the precepts ceremony that the kokyo does solo and then we all come in with an anchoring verse. I'd hear that modelled of course and have a scratchy faint recording but also it's written out on a staff in the copy I made at Green Gulch Farm in the late 1980's. I've been working recently on trying to understand exactly how the written music sounds and I found the way it's written was way too high for our voices so I transcribed it down 4 whole steps, I think it was, and ended up with this:

[Precepts Ceremony sung part](#)

If you go to Practice, and then Chanting on our website and scroll all the way down you'll find this. Desiree thinks one of the notes is off a half step so I need to go in and check on that again.

The musical Zen scholar Stephen Slotow says that this ritual music of shomyo is "elaborate, sophisticated, melodic, melismatic, and rhythmically varied" - I had to look up melismatic which means "Of, relating to, or being a melisma; the style of singing several notes to one syllable of text." which I'm not sure I totally understand but yeah. "rhythmically varied" is definitely true: when I was trying to transcribe the notes for this part there were no staves or time signature, you know like most Western music is 4/4 time, and the best I could figure to make the different lengths of the notes fit I guessed at 6/4 time. 6 quarter notes in each measure, but even still I had a few notes that tied across measures. I couldn't figure out any even division that worked perfectly.

So that's pretty complex and requires a lot of training. When we were in Japan we learned about a simpler melodic style called baika which is sung mostly by lay members of the sangha, the danka they call them in Japan. A group that would get together weekly to practice and learn the songs. Very much like a church choir. We learned one song which at one point I did try to introduce into our liturgy but it was a challenge. Maybe I'll try again sometime. It was really pretty.

But it's interesting that the Japanese tradition has this simpler dokkyo style. The Enmei Jukku Kannon Gyo we just chanted is a great example of that. If you listen it's not all right on one pitch: kan ze on NA mu butsu yo bustu U en yo... little variations in there but with a common baseline.

Since they had that style that's pretty easy to learn it made it into Western Zen pretty easily.

And then the question of how much to translate into the English or whatever the local language is. And here the Zen movement has had a variety of attitudes. Some teachers want to do everything in an intelligible language, some want to retrain the feeling and energy of the original. And it turns out this varies not just after Western disciples have taken over but there's been a variety of approaches from the Japanese teachers too. Here are the examples of two well known early Westerners to bring Zen to the West: Philip Kapleau and Jiyu Kennett who started some of the first Western centers in the 1960's.

Kapleau is famous for his early Zen book, *The Three Pillars of Zen*. He was an American court reporter working in Japan after WWII and from there stumbled into an interest in Zen. He practiced with a pretty innovative Japanese teacher who was part of creating the modern merging of Soto and Rinzai Zen that emphasized lay people doing zazen - Yasutani Roshi was his name. Yasutani was also Aitken Roshi's teacher. But Yasutani didn't want him to translate anything into English and it was part of his famous break with his teacher. And his whole lineage is looked a little funny from the Japanese side because he never actually received Dharma Transmission himself as a result and

then went on to ordain others and start a Zen order. Here's what he said about this piece of that difficult loss: p104

But it went totally the opposite way for Jiyu Kennett - an English woman who somehow got herself admitted to one of the big Soto Zen headquarters temples, Sojiji, in 1962 and was the first Western woman ordained there. She was almost the first Western woman ordained in Japan but Ruth Fuller Sasaki beat her to it by a few years - another really interesting modern Zen ancestor. Anyway Kennett grew up signing in the Anglican churches of England which has it's own complex choral tradition. And her Japanese teacher, Keido chisan Koho, felt the opposite of Kapleau's teacher: he told her she should adapt everything: p68.

And so here at Red Cedar through our lineage through Suzuki Roshi we ended up with a blend of English and Sino-Japanese. And that's important to remember too is the Japanese we chant isn't modern Japanese and wouldn't make any more sense to a Japanese person who wasn't trained in Zen than it would you an American. It's that whole deal about how when the Japanese adopted Chinese characters long, long ago they ended up with one way of pronouncing them when they are referring to them as Chinese characters called on'yomi - which translated to "sound-based reading" - but as the characters were incorporated into spoken Japanese the pronunciations changed - the new system called kun'yomi and they also created a phonetic alphabet. Sino here means "china" so Sino-Japanese is a good term for this odd phenomena: chinese-japanese. Not japanese-japanese. In the chant books in Japan you find tiny little hiragana letters, the phonetic characters, next to each Chinese character so that a Japanese person knows how to pronounce them.

And it gets even weirder as if the kanji, the Chinese characters, are being used as the name of something they might be pronounced in the older on'yomi style but if the character has a regular type meaning they use kun'yomi. The famous example is the lovely swooping character for heart-mind that's called shin in Sino-Japanese (on'yomi) and kokoro in modern Japanese (kun'yomi). Same word very different sounds.

It's a complex and strange thing this tradition we've received. And I know Korean Zen has a similar complex relationship between native Korean sounds and words and the Chinese characters they borrowed. I'm sure all over East Asia this rich conversation with the cultural power of China happened over the millenia.

Anyway, do remember that in all cases though the Japanese have a very specific set of pronunciation rules that are consistent regardless of on'yomi or kun'yomi or phonetic words. The vowels are as in Spanish and the two that trip us up are the "o" which is pronounced "owe" and the "i" which is pronounced "eee".

Please get your sutra book out to the Enmei Jukku Kannon Gyo and let's highlight the two common issues here.

[I chant it slowly, underline "on" and "shin" - all chant it slowly] - how you hold your mouth is a key thing. Kind of purse your lips a little fish style for on and smile for shin.

And this is a kind of wonderful mindfulness practice for us every time we chant in Sino-Japanese to not just default to reading them as if they were English words. It takes presence and some diligence to stay off autopilot. Our kokyos are especially important here as these sounds are in the titles too so they can remind us that it's "own" (Kannon) not "ahn" (Kanahn) that ones subtle. Shin is less sublte. Turn the page to the Heart Sutra in Japanese. Maka Hanya Haramita Shin Gyo.

And don't feel bad if you blow it, but make effort. This isn't just "getting it right" - it's the practice of paying attention. Of being fully here. There is a precision to this practice and when everything's humming along well that precision is totally in alignment with waking up.

And it's kind of wonderful that our practice includes music. Strange music to our ears maybe but music nonetheless.

The Buddha often used the metaphor of being like a musical instrument as we practice and paying attention to our attunement. Here's the classic teaching from the early Suttas. The Buddha was noticing that his student Sona was struggling in his meditation - the

Buddha actually looked inside his mind to see this (just in case you thought Buddhism was all kind of everyday and rational the Buddha often did this, handy trick) and saw that Sona was all bound up in tense repetitive thinking so he offered this teaching. The instrument mentioned here, the vina, is kind of cross of three-stringed that you fretted like a guitar.

"Now what do you think, Sona. Before, when you were a house-dweller, were you skilled at playing the vina?"

"Yes, lord."

"And what do you think: when the strings of your vina were too taut, was your vina in tune & playable?"

"No, lord."

"And what do you think: when the strings of your vina were too loose, was your vina in tune & playable?"

"No, lord."

"And what do you think: when the strings of your vina were neither too taut nor too loose, but tuned^[1] to be right on pitch, was your vina in tune & playable?"

"Yes, lord."

"In the same way, Sona, over-aroused persistence leads to restlessness, overly slack persistence leads to laziness. Thus you should determine the right pitch for your persistence, attune^[2] the pitch of the [five] faculties [to that], and there pick up your theme."

"Yes, lord," Ven. Sona answered the Blessed One. Then, having given this exhortation to Ven. Sona, the Blessed One — as a strong man might stretch out his bent arm or bend his outstretched arm

— disappeared from the Cool Wood and appeared on Vulture Peak Mountain.

So after that, Ven. Sona determined the right pitch for his persistence, attuned the pitch of the [five] faculties [to that], and there picked up his theme. Dwelling alone, secluded, heedful, ardent, & resolute, he in no long time reached & remained in the supreme goal of the holy life for which clansmen rightly go forth from home into homelessness, knowing & realizing it for himself in the here & now. He knew: "Birth is ended, the holy life fulfilled, the task done. There is nothing further for the sake of this world." And thus Ven. Sona became another one of the arahants.

So this is a good teaching for us in our chanting, our practice and our living in general. Are you too tight or too loose? Are you in attunement? Are you tuned in?

Apparently in the Buddha's time there wasn't standard tuning - how everyone agrees that a C note is the exact same pitch all over the world, but they hadn't made that agreement then. So musicians would have to really listen to the tuning at a musical gathering and tune their instrument to fit in.

It's the same with every gathering - everything interaction - everything we do: can we be aware of how things are and tune in. Join in harmony with the situation.

And there may be times when it is appropriate to ask the others to come to your tuning. This isn't a passive thing of always giving yourself over the situation either. It's a conversation of attunement.

How do you know when you're too tight or too loose? Is your chanting is too high or too low? Too fast or too slow?

We say "chant with your ears, not just your mouth" - one of our dear sangha members was feeling judgmental of another of us and said he wished that person could learn to have "big ears and small mouth" - a good idea for all of to open our ears before we open our mouth, bus

but of course it can be a big problem when we think we know what someone else needs to do.

And it really does seem to be incredibly and consistently true that if there's a quality in someone else we find jarring, out of tune, it's a quality we also have within us. There's an unhappy kind of resonance that happens and it's our own work to feel into that and own the ways I'm out of tune, each of us a bit out of tune. And then it's time to re-open the ears. To listen to our own hearts. To listen to each other.

It's subtle ongoing work isn't it? In one of the teaching poems in our chant book it says "a hairsbreadth deviation will fail to accord with the proper attunement" - just a hair off is still...off. I've always found that both discouraging - so subtle! How are we ever going to get it right? And also encouraging: for the most part we're just a little tiny bit off. We're pretty good, pretty much in tune but not perfectly so.

Let's discuss. How do you relate to this idea of tuning in, being in tune with yourself and others, with attunement? How do you know if you're too tight or too loose? And probably there are more dimensions to this than just tight-or-loose.