

Twelve Points Concerning Ceremonial

By Reverend Master Oswin Hollenbeck

1. Ceremonial expresses gratitude—for human life and the opportunity to encounter and practice the Buddha's teaching.
2. In ceremonies, we create and offer merit, the good that arises naturally from meditation and training. We dedicate it to all beings, and depending on the occasion, to specific people or purposes.
3. Try viewing ceremonial as the art of dance, except with ceremonies, there is no performance that others observe. Everyone participates, as in folk dancing or country square dance.
4. One monk, called a celebrant, leads the ceremony, but everyone plays a part. The celebrant makes offerings at the altar on behalf of everyone. Your presence of mind affects others and the whole.
5. We bow to express with our whole body our confidence in the Buddha—our own potential for awakening to Reality, our True Nature—as well as in the Dharma, the path that leads to awakening, and in the Sangha, the community that practices the Buddha's way.
6. Ceremonies are structured around scriptures—teachings of the Buddha. We familiarize ourselves with the scriptures that our tradition emphasizes by participating in ceremonies together.
7. Our religious order sets scriptures to Western plainsong chant, a form of religious music dating back to ancient Greek and medieval times that is familiar to our Western ear. Music helps with memorizing the scriptures, which can be helpful, and adds to the enjoyment of doing ceremonies.
8. Try viewing ceremonies as a non-conceptual, “right-brain” experiential way to learn the Buddha's teaching, like the “holi-deck” in the Star Trek television series. One is “in” the Dharma and receives it through all the senses, similar to total immersion in a foreign language. Ceremonial is the temporary creation of a Pure Land, in which we can see, hear, sense, be, act, and live like Buddha.
9. The details in ceremonies foster mindfulness and concentration. However, the attitude of mind and heart, not performance of the movements and forms perfectly, remains paramount and vital.
10. There are no mistakes in ceremonies. Simply continue as you would as part of an athletic event or music performance. This is a model for life. We have a plan or blueprint, and then there's the actual.
11. Ceremonies build community by everyone relinquishing their preferences and doing things together in a harmonious way. The results are inward joy and outward beauty.
12. Ceremonies offer the opportunity to cultivate faith and devotion, which in time transforms into certainty and strength. Some resistance in the beginning is normal for Americans. An appreciation and understanding usually grow over time if we continue to make the effort.

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