

Why Do Ceremonial?

In all major Buddhist traditions there is a certain amount of ceremonial. In some it is the main focus of daily practice, in others it is minimal, but it is always there in one form or another. Here in the West, many Buddhists don't see the point of doing ceremonies. For some people it is a strong reminder, whether positive or negative, of their former religion. It may be seen as irrelevant and outdated, as superstition, or as cultural baggage that can be left behind. One may wonder, why waste time with ceremonies when we could be meditating or listening to a Dharma talk? When I looked in some of the popular Western Buddhist magazines for articles on ceremonial, I found none.

Actually, most people do like a certain amount of ceremonial, though they may not think of it that way. People like weddings, they will go to some trouble to attend the funeral of someone they care about, many people will bury a beloved pet in the backyard with a little ceremony of their own, national events are often marked with ceremonies, and so on.

Why do people like these kinds of ceremonies? Ceremonial is a very direct, powerful way of expressing something. Weddings express the commitment between two people in a way that just filling in a form would not. At a funeral or memorial the very formality of the occasion allows people to open up and grieve. Any ceremony worth its salt has an impact on those who participate, whether it is a special festival for a momentous occasion or simply a regular service that is done every day with care and mindfulness.

In Buddhism, the most important ceremonial thing we do is to bow, whether we are simply bending at the waist with our palms together, or making a full prostration. "As long as bowing lasts, Buddhism will last." In looking at bowing we can see all the elements of ceremonial, why it helps us, and how we can understand and practice it.

First of all, we can only understand bowing by doing it. We can talk about it and ask why people do it, but in the end the only thing that makes any sense is just to bow. We understand it with our body and our heart, not with our mind. The more we do it, the better we understand it. And this is true of any ceremonial: it has an effect on us that is beyond any words to describe, just as meditation does, and this effect is often subtle and cumulative.

At different times we are expressing different things when we bow, whether collectively or individually. Sometimes we are full of joy and gratitude for the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, we see how much they help us in our lives, and we just want to bow. At other times we may be worried or in distress, and we are asking for help.

Bowing is a way of doing that very directly, beyond words, beyond asking for some particular resolution or outcome. It is a way of letting go, of offering up our problem or our suffering, and simply asking for help. Again at other times, we may be bowing in repentance of our karmic mistakes, whether something from the past that haunts us, a character fault that we are trying to correct, or a big mistake we just made today that hurt somebody. To bow at such a time brings comfort: we honestly recognize our mistake, say we're sorry, and resolve to change.

At this point, of course, one may ask, "Who are we bowing to? Who are we asking for help? Who are we saying we're sorry to? What is going on?"

Different Buddhists in different traditions, and even within the same tradition, may see the answer to this question in different ways. For some there is a "Who," for some there is more of a "What." In any case, there is definitely Something to bow to. As the Buddha said, "Monks, there is a not-born, a not-become, a not-made, a not-compounded. Monks, if that unborn, not-become, not-made, not-compounded were not, there would be apparent no escape from this here that is born, become, made, compounded. But since, monks, there is an unborn, not-become, not-made, not-compounded, therefore the escape from this here that is born, become, made, compounded is apparent...." This is what Great Master Bankei calls "The Unborn," and which many people call "Buddha Nature." Some people call it Thusness, or Suchness, or our Original Face, or That Which Is, or the Dharmakaya, or one of a host of other names. In some Buddhist traditions they talk about what it is, and in others they talk about what it isn't. One thing is clear, however: whatever it is, it's a lot bigger than we are.

Buddhist ceremonial helps us to open up to this Something that is bigger than we are. We bow to it, we open our hearts to it, we turn towards it, we entrust ourselves to it. All the different aspects of ceremonial help with this: bowing, offering incense, processing, chanting or singing the scriptures, the music itself if we have music. Each of these aspects is an offering that we are making, something we are giving. Intuitively we know that this helps both ourselves and other beings. Ceremonial transcends the intellect, just as bowing does, and it works on a deeper level than our brain. Like meditation, it is a way of opening up to the unknown, of letting go of our little self that thinks it knows and that wants to be in charge. It helps us to deepen our faith and reverence for That which is greater than we are.

Every ceremony is doing something, whether we are offering merit to other beings, doing a memorial, blessing a house, expressing gratitude, or doing our daily morning service. We make offerings, usually of incense, with candles, flowers and fruit on the altar, we make bows and recite scriptures, we incorporate the essential purpose of the ceremony, and we offer the merit of all this to somebody else, we don't keep it for ourselves. This is the basic form.

Ceremonial is not magic. It is not some formula that you have to get right or it won't work, because that would just be superstition. That is what the Buddha rejected, having been brought up in a society in which strict adherence to ritual was considered very important. Sometimes you can't do the ceremony in a formal way, but you can do the essential part in a very simple way, such as blessing a dead animal by the roadside or giving the Precepts to a dying person. The important thing is that you do the deed, as sincerely and wholeheartedly as you can. Sometimes we don't get it quite right, we might miss something out or do it in the wrong order, and then we have to be flexible and make it work. It is our attitude that makes the ceremony.

One of the most important aspects of ceremonial is that it expresses the harmony of the Sangha. We all do the ceremony together, and that gives it a lot more strength, in the same way that meditating together helps us. Reciting the scriptures together, making the offerings together, bowing together, all of this is much stronger and bigger than each of us alone. If we are chanting or singing, we try to do it in harmony, so that it will sound beautiful. In our actions we have to work together in harmony, each with our part to play. We do it together, not insisting on our own way or our own pace. If someone makes a mistake or does something unexpected we need to be flexible and attentive, not blaming or insisting, and make it work. It is a wonderful practice for letting go of our own view, our own self, and being willing to follow. Thus we practice harmony of body, speech and mind.

Ceremonial is meditation in action. It is a bridge between sitting meditation and daily life, and, indeed, it often comes between the two: you sit, you have a ceremony, then you go to work. In many ways it is just like condensed, vivid daily life without a lot of the distractions. We are moving, we are doing something with other people, we have our own part to play, and we are trying to be mindful, sincerely doing our best. When we cultivate the mind of reverence and gratitude that is the essence of ceremonial, this mind begins to pervade our daily life just as the mind of meditation does. Everything can be seen as a kind of ceremony, from cooking a meal to driving to work. We try to be mindful and keep the Precepts; we want to treat other people with kindness and respect; we try to treat the things we use with care and gentleness, not roughness or indifference; and when we find ourselves rushing and grabbing in a hurry we are more likely to notice and say, "Wait a minute, that's not the way to do it."

Another way in which ceremonial is like condensed daily life is that our own particular form of "the self" can arise mightily during a ceremony, especially when we are not used to it. We may feel we should be filled with joy and gratitude and in fact sometimes we may feel resentful, or bored, or just indifferent. We may be tired, or distracted, or impatient, or we may experience massive resistance. If we have an active part to play in a ceremony, we may get all worried and confused if we are thinking about what happens next instead of concentrating on what we are doing now, or we

may be self-conscious and think everyone is looking at us and criticizing us. We may think "I'm rather good at this" and next moment miss our cue, or think, "I'm terrible at this" and make it more difficult for ourselves. This is exactly like daily life. Because it is a ceremony, it is easier to notice these things and let them go than when we are at work, for example. Very often our fatigue will lift, our irritation will dissipate, our resistance will soften or disappear. We may start with grumpiness and end with joy. This is one of the ways in which we work on the aspects of ourselves that cause us suffering. The ceremony itself helps us to gain a perspective of compassion and acceptance, and to renew our faith and willingness.

Ceremonial has effects that are beyond our capacity to understand. The offering of merit, for example, is a very powerful force for good that works in ways we cannot comprehend. Any ceremony done with a sincere heart helps all beings as well as ourselves. When we ask for help from the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas we allow their aspects of compassion, wisdom and goodness to manifest and blossom in ourselves. It is because a ceremony is an act of faith, of generosity and giving, and because we are doing it together that it has such effects.

Above all, ceremonial is a very human activity. We are just human beings, doing something together, making it work together, and stretching upward to greet That Which is greater, not because we are separate from It, but because It is greater than we are, and greater than we can imagine. We cannot control It or figure It out. All we can do is venerate It. We open our hearts to It, entrust ourselves to It, and do the very best we can, in faith. We are expressing the harmony of the Sangha Treasure, and the harmony of ourselves with That Which Is, because we are part of It and It is the whole of us.

*The one who bows and the One who is bowed to
are by their nature tranquil, devoid of all desire,
For Thou and I, we are not two.
May all us sentient beings together free ourselves
from our suffering and delusions
As we give rise to our supreme intention to realize the Truth.*