

## **Building Community: Aspects of Ceremonial, Part 4**

Although it may be true that ceremonial is an end rather than a means, the practice of ceremonial definitely develops certain aspects of training, such as building community. Sharing a common liturgy is one of the “six kinds of monastic harmony”<sup>1</sup> and strengthens both spiritual and practical parameters of community. How?

In the spiritual realm, we share through community a common focus of practice. When we gather in the Buddha Hall, we bow to the same Buddha and Bodhisattvas and other exemplars of training such as Achalanatha, Bodhidharma, and our Founders. We share the same aspiration. We all intend to follow the way of Shakyamuni Buddha; the Bodhisattvas of Compassion, Love, and Wisdom; the Bright One of Determination and Willingness; and the Zen Ancestors of Bodhidharma and the founding teachers Dogen, Keizan, Manzan, Rev. Master Jiyu, and the entire lineage down to “our Master of this very day.” We chant together with one voice the same scriptures, explanations, and guiding words and instructions of our tradition: *The Scripture of Avalokiteshwara Bodhisattva*, *The Scripture of Great Wisdom*, *The Litany of the Great Compassionate One*, “Sandokai,” and “The Most Excellent Mirror-Samadhi.” In so doing we develop the same mind and heart of training in the Way of Serene Reflection Meditation. We become the tradition as we change and develop our minds. The Way is stored within us. What a wonderful thing to have a group of people who all share the same instructions for walking the Path! We also actually become each other in a way as we all meld into one Heart Mind, which is another way to express letting go of self.

Turning now to practical aspects, we train our bodies through ceremonial—although of course, on a fundamental level body and mind are one. We can only separate them out in or-

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<sup>1</sup> Six Kinds of Reverent Harmony or Unity in a Monastery:

- bodily unity in form of worship
- oral unity in chanting
- mental unity in faith
- moral unity in observing precepts
- doctrinal unity in views & explanations
- economic unity in community of goods, deeds,  
studies & charity

from *A Dictionary of Chinese Buddhist Terms*, comp. Soothill & Hodous, London: Kegan Paul, 1937; 1976 reprint by Ch'eng Wen Publishers, Taiwan, page 133.

der to talk about them. What we do affects our mind; what we think—do with our minds— affects our body. Taken together we train the whole human psycho-physical-spiritual being.

In a previous article, “Raising a Flower, Turning the Wheel,” I presented the key role played by the celebrant in leading a ceremony. Through following the celebrant we sensitize ourselves to his or her teaching. Ideally, practice of this kind of following passes over into daily life. It is good to always be there when the celebrant needs a stick of incense. We also want to be there waiting and willing when the floor needs cleaning, breakfast needs cooking, or someone needs a ride to the airport, or any of the numerous mundane tasks of community life. Add to this all the activities we do in our respective monastic offices—kitchen, sacristy, maintenance, etc. Ideally we offer all with the direction the abbot gives. Likewise, can we follow the abbot or prior when he or she takes a new course in the life of the community, changes routines and schedules, reorganizes monastic offices and residences, or makes changes in diet, clothing, medical care, or distribution of offerings?

But there’s also the interaction and interplay of everyone else who is present at a ceremony. There are no observers; the celebrant only leads. Ceremonial provides a fertile and excellent field for learning how to work together practically as a community. Here are some examples. First, movement. In processing into the hall and bowing, there are particular routes to follow, assigned seats for certain officers or ceremony participants, standards for bowing (full mat, Z-fold mat, toward altar, toward center, offset or straight line?), and specific patterns for circumambulation and incense offering (dragoning, serpentine, circular, bows at altar or to images, to Founders Shrine, to name a few options). As a religious community we endeavor to move and act together in such a way that we exhibit harmony, which is the Sangha Treasure. We all have the opportunity to listen to and follow someone else’s lead (the celebrant and precentor), recite scriptures according to tradition, follow routes someone else has laid out, and perform myriad other actions someone else has determined. So many opportunities for letting go of our personal wishes and opinions and to do them together as one body without grumbling! It’s just one more chance arising frequently throughout the day to “cast off body and mind,” as Great Master Dogen put it.

Ideally, all of this practice carries over to daily life in the temple. Can we work together to prepare a meal, clean the temple, care for the ill, or prepare the Journal for mailing? How do the abbot and seniors make decisions regarding interpersonal conflict, residents’ different needs, financial difficulties, or trainees who infringe upon the rules or need extra guidance? Can we do all these things in harmony so that people can see and know the Sangha Treasure? Can we shew the Sangha Treasure, using “shew” with the old meaning that Rev. Master Jiyu often used, which means not only to show physically, but also to point out intuitively?

Then there's chanting scriptures. Can we stay alert and keep time with each other? Can we make a joyful, pleasing sound that inspires others? Are we willing to memorize scriptures and invocations, practice on our own, attend choir practices, or make other preparation so that everyone pulling together makes for a beautiful and inspiring ceremony? All the monks of the Order gathering after Rev. Master Jiyu's death to do her funeral ceremonies was a wonderful example of this. None of us had ever done any of these ceremonies; many of us had not seen each other for years, let alone do ceremonial together. Everyday we gathered in the Buddha Hall to learn a new ceremony that we would offer the next day. It was such a skillful way for us to be and work together spiritually and practically when we all were grieving—it gave us something to do—and it helped prepare us for the decision-making that followed the funeral.

In addition to meter, for those who know parts, can we learn to sing in tune with each other, paying attention to the slightest deviation among each other and all moving to harmonize? Singing a cappella with parts can be a wonderful and challenging task—it's hard work. One has to really listen to each other, relinquish one's own pitch (even if it's right), and adjust to others. However, sometimes you are right and others need to adjust to you. It all happens in a second or two, ideally, and everyone needs to have their mind in meditation gear to make the shifts. Chanting together often and familiarizing ourselves with each other's voices helps too. And for those who don't know parts, don't think singing melody is second best. Without a strong melody line, chants and songs done in parts lack body. The melody or tune is the heart of the chant. We are all part of the body of the Buddha.

Another facet of community building through ceremonial is interconnection and flexibility. For daily services, all the seniors know the celebrant's role and can step in at any time. They are often called upon to do so. All the novice monks serve as acolytes and provide essential sacristy support, often unnoticed in the background. When I was at Shasta Abbey in the 1990s, all the Transmitted monks played the gongs and musical instruments and worked the tape player which provided accompaniment for scriptures. Finally, all the monks served as chaplains (assistants) to the celebrant and participated in the Great Monks Offertory. This kind of shared knowledge, responsibility, and cooperation transfers over to other aspects of community life in that most monks can substitute in various monastic offices when others are ill or need to travel on monastery business or go on retreat, renewal, or family visit. It also prevents the community from relying on anyone so that one monk becomes indispensable, and it prevents "empire building"—one monk creating a situation or circumstances where they rule all without refuge in other monks.

It perhaps goes without saying that, in addition to the effects described here on community life, all this attention to detail cultivates mindfulness and concentration. This in itself transfers indirectly to the peace and harmony of a community. What a boon to have its members exercising this much care in every aspect of life—practical, mental, and spiritual—from

driving the cars to offering sanzen. It seems that every contemplative Buddhist tradition includes this type of practice in some form. Tibetan/Vajrayana practitioners do extensive visualization, sand mandalas, and other artwork; Theravada monastics memorize and carefully observe their Pali vinaya (monastic regulations); Chinese and Japanese devotees would often use scripture copying (called *shakyo* in Japanese) to cultivate these qualities of mind. For us as meditators in our Soto Zen/Serene Reflection tradition, we give our attention to ceremonial and the work of daily life. In a subsequent article I plan to discuss other benefits of ceremonial for our daily life practice, delving into what Great Master Keizan called “the ceremony of daily life.”

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