

An excerpt from “Ceremony and the Art of Dance”

What are the basic building blocks, or “formalized gestures” of the art of active ceremonial? What are the forms which show movement? In truth, they can be anything which expresses an aspect of our relationship with the Unborn (the Power). Here I will detail a few of the important component parts that have been stylized into our Buddhist ceremonies: offering, bowing, chanting, and circumambulation.

All ceremonies begin with an **offering**. Offerings find their source in the primordial and primeval instinct to appease or influence the spirits (powers) of the perceived world, usually through sacrifice. We are fortunately far beyond human sacrifice, an evolutionary shift represented in Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) by the substitution of a ram when God asked Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac.¹ And we no longer bury people alive so that our leaders will have servants in an afterlife, as was the custom in ancient China! Thankfully, most religions no longer sacrifice animals, either. A lasting influence of the Buddha’s teaching in India was the proscription on animal sacrifice.

So what do we offer? Items which have symbolic value and represent what is occurring in the practice: incense (the “punk” of our bodies,² set on fire by our will to train), flowers (our karmic inheritance), water (our efforts at purification of the heart), fruit (the result of the labor of our lives), etc. The artistic form of offering expresses the feeling or emotion that originally accompanied sacrifice. Like our primitive forbears, we wish to transcend the separate self by offering what is of greatest value, ourselves. There is an intuitive, logical sense to the inherent structure of the various offerings. This produces art.

Bowing, for me, is the most important form we use in our practice. There are different degrees of bowing, depending on the circumstances, but they all contain and begin with gassho.³ The gassho by itself is the simplest form of bowing. It represents the lotus bud, our potential to act and live from our Buddha Nature, and the recognition of

¹ Karen Armstrong, *The Great Transformation: The Beginnings of Our Religious Traditions*, New York: Alfred Knopf, 2006, p. 94.

² A “punk” is slender, slowly burning stick used to light fireworks. A stick of incense is essentially a punk, made of rolled or compressed sawdust, charcoal, or originally, manure—with fragrance added.

³ Gassho is the hand mudra (position) of palms joined together in front of one’s heart.

That in whatever is bowed to. A full bow, or prostration, shows the opening of the lotus blossom, the Heart-Mind or Buddha Nature.

Bowing demonstrates and cultivates many aspects of training: our humility—our recognition of something greater than ourselves; our gratitude for the Three Treasures and the opportunity to train; and our willingness to follow those promptings of the heart. Bowing on cue in a ceremony shows our intention to follow the leadership of the abbot or prior and our willingness to serve the True Master. Bowing together demonstrates our willingness to work harmoniously with other members of the community, with whom we share a connection many may find deeper than blood kinship. Bowing shows the fundamental heart of our tradition which is preserved and passed on through the Master-disciple relationship. We have a saying, “As long as bowing lasts, Buddhism will endure. When bowing ceases, Buddhism will be destroyed.” The heart-mind of meditation activates or enlivens the bow—it is our heart’s intent that makes it more than just an empty, lifeless, or routine gesture.

Another stylized activity or form is **chanting**. Our Order uses western plainsong chant to accompany our Scriptures. It is no accident that the music matches the fundamental teachings of our tradition—stillness and brightness. Listen to it sometime for how it supports and expresses these teachings and the specific purposes of various ceremonies. Rev. Master Jiyu, being a highly trained musician and composer, intentionally composed our chants in specific musical modes that foster particular feelings, emotions, or “moods.” I have heard it intimated in a public talk by one of our senior Masters that these chants touch and energize deeper aspects of body and mind in a way similar to the spiritual effects of chanting Sanskrit syllables, as held in the “vibration theory.”

The plainsong chants Rev. Master Jiyu incorporated into our ceremonies have their obscure origins at the very beginning of Western civilization in ancient Greece. They were subsequently developed through the medieval Christian period and thus have a deep cultural familiarity for Westerners. The mode most of our Scriptures are composed in is one that was used for “spiritual” activities. They have a quality of stillness, yet they move. They are bright, but not emotional. They do not rouse us to war or induce grief, like the two Greek modes remaining in common use in Western music, the major and minor scales. The plainsong chants we use do not haunt our minds throughout the day the way popular, secular tunes often do. Rev. Master Jiyu took up these ancient Western chants when she ascertained that the English translations of the Scriptures she was making with her teachers in Japan did not fit the same rhythm patterns of the Japanese monosyllabic accompaniment.

Chanting is a form of meditation used by almost all faith traditions. It must surely help us realize an altered state of consciousness. In our tradition chanting includes both “message and medium”, ends and means, or truth and path. We use chanting as a valuable practice in and of itself, but it also serves a utilitarian purpose in aiding in memorizing the various teachings. Each Scripture has its own particular chant and becomes associated with it in our minds. Chants that accompany scriptures also adorn the words’ meaning, in the same way that the statue on the altar was crafted to be beautiful, intended to inspire awe, devotion, worship, gratitude, and wonder. People sometimes complain about our Order’s practice of “singing hymns,” yet if one looks carefully at the Scriptures, they are full of *gathas*, Sanskrit for “hymns of praise and joy.” Many Mahayana scriptures such as the *Lotus Scripture* alternate prose and verse, and the verse sections are considered by scholars to be the older part of such scriptures. So chanting, in one’s native tongue, is a very traditional practice! We couldn’t be in better company or have sounder references.

After a ceremony we can find ourselves uplifted. The music has served its purpose. Then we put the chants down and move on seamlessly to the next activity: the music isn’t “sticky.” One activity flows into the next as part of one greater ceremony. We continue and maintain the one Mind.

A final form of active ceremonial is **circumambulation**, moving together slowly in a large circular pattern. This processing to music is a development of walking meditation and builds on that same principle of “just doing.” The liturgical term for circumambulation is “the Eternal Procession.” Right there you have the mantra of *The Scripture of Great Wisdom*: “Going, going, going on beyond, and always going on beyond, always becoming Buddha. Hail!” And like the knot of eternal love, there is no beginning and no end. The movements of the ceremony express the fundamental teaching of the tradition.

We no longer circle an actual fire, yet we still move in a circular fashion. Everyone in the community attends and all present participate—there are no observers. No one is not a part of the “magic circle,” the web of life. Depending on the particular ceremony, we process around, and sometimes with, the celebrant, the “leading teacher” of the community. Usually this monk is the abbot or prior, but from time to time another senior monk fills this ceremonial responsibility. He or she represents the Dharma, the central blazing point, the Fire, and their training reflects the Buddha on the altar, the Source. Sometimes everyone makes offerings at the altar—granular incense, scented water, flowers, candles, cakes and tea. Each time during the ceremony when the celebrant makes an offering, all present make *gassho*, which is the sign or seal of our participating in that offering. The celebrant offers on behalf of everyone—it is not his or

her personal offering. The large “incense gong” is struck to indicate the beginning and ending of such an offering so that everyone may participate.

In circumambulation, we trace out different patterns or ‘graphs’—**activity**, yet all are forms of a circle—**stillness**. We move within Emptiness. And the graph is the circle. We are one with Emptiness. We move quietly, fluidly, flowingly as one body; we chant the Scriptures with one voice. Our minds are in meditation, and our bodily and verbal movements or gestures preserve and express the stillness. “All is different” is within and coterminous with the “all is One.”



Like our formal sitting meditation, all these movements are fundamentally non-dualistic, and our ceremonial must express that in order for it to be “true.” There is the One, the Absolute, the Unborn, the Buddha. The “circle” we form is an imaginary line in the same way that the celebrant at a Feeding the Hungry Ghost Ceremony draws a circle in the air with his or her fountain scepter to provide a mouth in Emptiness for the spirits to receive the food offerings. Yet, fundamentally all is One—the separation is imaginary. In truth, the whole universe gathers at a ceremony, and the offertory at the end of most ceremonies underscores this truth by offering to all beings any merit created.

The offerings at the altar, too, represent the fundamental unity of ourselves and the Unborn—the activity of training within our very own heart—and everyone’s. Likewise, through chanting we engage the voice and ears through the musical forms we engage in. The meaning of the words are implanted deep within our minds. In fact, these teachings actually become our minds! Body and mind are not separate. In similar fashion, bowing is not about kowtowing to an image on an altar, but about the inmost attitude and aspiration of our heart. Bowing is an active mudra of Serene Reflection Meditation—the physical expression of the heart-mind of training.

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