

Aspects of Ceremonial

Part 3: Raising a Flower, Turning the Wheel

A ceremony in our Serene Reflection/Soto Zen tradition can be seen as a reenactment of the first Transmission of the Dharma from Shakyamuni Buddha to Makakashyo (Mahakashyapa), the First Zen Ancestor. In lieu of a Dharma talk, Shakyamuni silently held up a flower; only Makakashyo recognized the Buddha's intent and smiled. Thus began the Chan/Zen "transmission outside the Scriptures."

This exchange occurs in each ceremony as the celebrant, the "leading teacher," holds up a flower and opens his or her heart, indicating that a teaching is imminent. In our daily monastic ceremonies the celebrant literally holds a lotus scepter, symbolizing a lotus blossom, the awakened heart. As participants in the ceremony, we each have the opportunity to "smile," to respond with an awakened heart and recite the teaching of the scripture, as well as enact the physical movements of the ceremony.

In narratives from the older scriptures of the Pali canon, sometimes the Buddha smiles, indicating that he has "seen" something that no one else has. Usually Ananda, the Buddha's devoted attendant, later inquires on behalf of everyone why that particular situation caused a smile. The reason is that the Buddha knows the karmic cause of the events, a gift of insight whose complete extent is specific to a Buddha. Shakyamuni then uses the example to instruct his disciples on the workings of moral cause and effect.

Smiling occurs in Mahayana scriptures, too, one example being this verse from a *Prajnaparamita/Perfection of Wisdom Scripture*: "In response to the display of Buddha delight, the venerable Ananda

...gracefully inclines his joined hands toward the embodiment of enlightenment and softly inquires: *O Lord, it is never without an illuminating reason that the Tathagatas manifest their cosmic smile.*" On these occasions, the Buddha smiled in response to the declaration by those present of their vow to realize enlightenment for the benefit of all beings—fully, perfected enlightenment.¹

As in the first Transmission, in our ceremonies the disciples, rather than the Buddha, smile. We have a reason for joy, for we can see That which is not visible to the ordinary eye. When the celebrant holds up the flower, we anticipate the revealing of the Dharma, Reality itself. We do not wait to see such with our human eye, we act—we express with faith the smile of recognition. Our smile also, like the Buddha's, reflects our assent to joining with and following the teacher as we practice the Bodhisattva vow. We work together to create the merit that benefits all of existence.

Each person at a ceremony has the opportunity to smile. There are no observers, only participants, at a Buddhist ceremony. Each of us has the responsibility to respond to the raising of the flower and thus to share in causing the wheel of the Dharma turn. "Turning the wheel of the Dharma" indicates the Buddha giving a sermon. The wheel of the law (Sanskrit, *Dharmachakra*) was one of the emblems of an emperor in ancient India—he needed a great wheel, a large chariot, to traverse his extensive empire. The Buddha's followers adopted the symbol to refer to the Buddha, the king of the Dharma, giving voice to his universal Truth which rang out throughout the entirety of space, and throughout time as well. Great masters like Dogen often point out that Shakyamuni's teaching is nothing new: it is the teaching of all the Buddhas, past, present, and future. It is timeless and eternal.²

Turning the wheel is not limited, though, to the teacher. Those present also turn the wheel when we open our hearts in meditation and hear the teaching. The teacher's wheel turns our wheel, like cogs in an old-fashioned clock or analog watch. The eternity of the teacher, the Buddha nature, "pings" that same nature in us. We share in the same Reality, even if we may not "feel" that with the ordinary senses. Note that the teacher does not teach without someone present to listen and without someone asking for the teaching. We do our part by smiling, recognizing That which cannot be seen and yet which we confidently in faith and trust, know, exists.

Ceremonies, like Dharma talks, are interactive. The celebrant holds up the lotus blossom, symbol of training and enlightenment. He or she also always walks to the altar in a circular clockwise direction. In our tradition, clockwise movements indicate that things are turning in the right direction, that is, in the direction of renunciation and liberation. This is another way to express turning the Wheel of the Dharma.

When the celebrant holds up the lotus, each of us "smiles" by making *gasshō*, a hand gesture that symbolizes a lotus bud, our potential and true nature. We also bow, making prostrations, thus showing the opening and blossoming of the lotus, our heart, and then recite the Teaching for that occasion. We both give and receive, through both hearing and chanting. Yet what is it we give and receive, and who is it that gives and receives?

"The gift of the Dharma excels all gifts." Dharma is both the path to reality and the Reality itself. This is another way of expressing Dogen's well-known phrase "training and enlightenment are one." When we walk the path, we are enlightened. When we practice the Dharma, we awaken in that moment and flow in that reality. That

flowing is enlightenment. And who gives and receives? Our ordination ceremonies remind us that both giver and recipient, and the act of giving itself, are empty, that is, pure and immaculate, without any sense of a separate or defiled self. It is all Buddha Nature. If we think, “I am turning the Dharma wheel,” we have separated ourselves off, temporarily obscuring the truth of our real existence. It is one smile, one turning.

The celebrant’s offering of the Dharma ultimately cannot be expressed in words, which is why the Buddha, in passing on the deepest teaching to those who were ready, simply held up a flower. He turned the Wheel of Dharma Reality, and Makakashyo, in knowing that reality, smiled in response and recognition.

So the next time you come to a ceremony, remind yourself to see this reenactment of the heart of our tradition, an echo of the first Transmission of the Dharma. Join in as an active participant in turning the Wheel of the Teaching. We each have a unique opportunity and a choice: we make ourselves ready to receive that greatest gift by “smiling” when the celebrant holds up the Flower.

Rev. Oswin

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¹ Lex Hixon, *Mother of the Buddhas: Meditation on the Prajnaparamita Sutra* (Wheaton, Illinois: Quest Books, 1993), p. 188.

² See *Shoaku Makusa -- On ‘Refrain from All Evil Whatsoever’* (Discourse 9) in Eihei Dogen’s *Shobogenzo*, Shasta Abbey translation by Rev. Hubert Nearman, 2008: www.shastaabbey.org/shobogenzo1.htm.



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