

## Aspects of Ceremonial

Ceremonial is a practice vital to our Serene Reflection/Soto Zen tradition. In several articles I will explore different aspects of this practice—its origins, purpose, uses, and benefits. The series should be approached as if one were viewing an object from different angles, thus seeing ceremonial “in the round.” Some reflections may appear in more than one article, as discussing ceremonial is like taking apart a piece of fabric: All the strands are related.

### Part 1: Origins, History & Structure

When and where did Buddhist ceremonial begin? Answers to such questions are long lost in the mists of time. I will nevertheless attempt to present a history of its origin and development. Being neither an historian nor a liturgist, my purpose is to show the underlying structure of a ceremony and its meaning. I will draw on the little history we know and fill in details based on oral transmission and insights gained through meditation and training. Also, please grant me permission to use what I call “imaginative history.”

It is often said that Great Master Keizan, the co-founder of Japanese Soto Zen in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, wrote most, if not all, of our tradition’s ceremonies. To say that he “wrote” them is not exactly correct. To be more accurate, we can say that he gave them their definitive form in Japanese Soto Zen. We know that Great Master Dogen, the other co-founder, in the 13<sup>th</sup> century practiced many of these same ceremonies. We also know that Dogen, Keizan, and many other early Soto Zen monastics practiced previously in other Japanese traditions such as Tendai and Shingon. Both these traditions emphasized ceremonial, the former grand ceremonies for the imperial court, primarily to obtain material blessings for the nation, and the latter secret esoteric rituals practiced privately by initiates. From one perspective, Soto Zen was a reform of Japanese Buddhism, hearkening back to early Buddhism by returning sitting meditation to its primary place in the practice.

Where did these Japanese ceremonies originate? Looking further back in history, we know from historical accounts such as those of the Japanese Tendai monk Ennin’s travels in China in the 9<sup>th</sup> century and the Chinese pilgrim monk Hsuan Tsang’s travels in India in the 7<sup>th</sup> century that ceremonies were performed in these seminal Buddhist countries. If we look further back, we find that ceremonial was a key component of the Indian pre-Buddhist religion based on the *Vedas* (ancient scriptures), conducted by the priestly caste of the brahmins. In one respect, the

teachings of the Buddha arose as a reaction to the misuse of such ceremonies, in which animal sacrifice and a belief in magic and deities were central. So how did Buddhism as a formal religion with scriptures and ceremonies develop out of its roots as a reaction to formality and ritual?

Here is one possibility. Contemplate for a moment the settings and customs described in early Buddhist scriptures when the Buddha offered the Dharma. Often a meal would be offered to the Buddha and some of his disciples at a householder's home. Afterwards, a conversation would ensue. The donor would approach the Blessed One (*bhagavan*, "reverend sir," "master," or "lord"), offer full bows, circumambulate (walk around) him three times, and then ask his or her question. After the Buddha's response, the questioner would perform these same acts before departing.

This interchange would be remembered by those disciples present, memorized by monks such as the Buddha's attendant Ananda, who had a prodigious memory, and subsequently passed on orally for several hundred years. Ultimately, it would be written down and become a "scripture." The acts of reverence, gratitude, and respect provide the basic elements of the ceremony's structure, or frame.

**Ceremony: A Picture in a Frame.** Try viewing a ceremony as a picture or photograph in a frame. The central focus of, and reason for, the ceremony is the scripture. The scripture is as the picture, and the ceremony as its frame. The ceremony is the setting or presentation, such as just described, and "holds the scripture in place." It often adds ornamental or decorative value as well, and can provide a referencing or indexing method for remembering scriptures: "If it's this frame/ ceremony, it must be that picture/scripture." Note that the frame or ceremony serves the picture or scripture, not vice versa.

**Bows:** Most ceremonies begin and end with full bows, or prostrations. Something within us wants to pay reverence and express gratitude to those who teach us the precious truths of life. The Buddha himself after his enlightenment searched for someone to express gratitude to. Through his divine eye he discovered that his former teachers had already passed away, so he bowed to the Dharma itself. If the Buddha considered bowing essential, it most likely will be helpful for us as well. One could say that the Buddha himself gave us the example for ceremonial practice through that initial act of bowing.

In visiting and training with monastics from other Buddhist traditions, monks of our Order have had the opportunity to see how the beginning and ending full bows of our ceremonies might have begun. As mentioned above, initially a person would bow when they came into the Buddha's presence and bow again when departing. In many Buddhist traditions, a person bows as soon as they enter a Buddha Hall, as well as to their teacher and/or seniors. They also bow when taking their leave. Soto Zen ceremonial incorporates these bows into a formal part of a ceremony. Thus, rather than each person bowing individually after arriving in and before leaving the hall, we do these sets of bows together at our ceremonial standing places. We bow together, following the celebrant's lead, as a way of cultivating harmony in the sangha community.

**Offerings:** The meaning of offerings will be taken up in a separate article. Suffice it to say here that offerings are always a part of a ceremony, and we can trace their source to the scenario given above where the supplicant requests Dharma after offering a meal. This exchange of offerings is highlighted in the alms verse used in the mealtime scriptures and on begging rounds: "The two kinds of alms, material and spiritual, have the endowment of boundless merit: Now that they have been fulfilled in this act of charity, Both self and others gain pleasure therefrom." (*Liturgy of the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives*, 1987, p. 461)

**Dedication and Request for Teaching:** At the beginning of each ceremony the celebrant, the "leading teacher," approaches the altar and expresses the intention of the activity. We can also view this as her or his requesting teaching, again following the pattern described in the setting above. For instance, in Morning Office, the liturgy instructs the celebrant, "[G]ive silent thanks for the explanation of how to train that is given in the first two Scriptures of this ceremony and *make the wish* that all shall understand it [italics my emphasis]." (*Liturgy of the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives for the Laity*, 2nd ed., 1990, p. 59)

**Circumambulation:** Just as our donor requesting teaching circumambulates the Buddha, so we follow a circular pattern of walking meditation in a ceremony. Who processes, the particular pattern, and the number of times vary according to circumstances, such as the purpose of the service. In our daily office, often only the celebrant moves, clockwise from the bowing seat to and from the altar. During public festivals, the monks process in a pattern called "dragon-ing" ("the Eternal

Procession”) while the lay practitioners walk in a large circle around the monks and offer incense at the main altar. We use a third pattern in the Shurangama Ceremony, a horizontal movement (from one side of the hall to the other and then back) called “serpentining.”

**Scripture:** Now we’re into the heart and purpose of the ceremony, the Scripture, just like when we focus on the photograph or painting that is the frame’s reason for existence. Much could and will be said later about scripture recitation. Here we simply note that it is an opportunity to both listen to and recite/chant a passage of the Buddha-Dharma. Scriptural recitation usually occurs during the circumambulation and incense offering.

**Offertory:** After we end the scripture, we return to the ceremonial “frame” to end our activity. The precentor recites an offertory dedicating, or sharing, the merit of the ceremony and expressing gratitude. The offertory functions symmetrically both to the offering and to the celebrant’s wish at the beginning.

**Bows:** The ceremony concludes with another set of full bows, and thus the frame is balanced and complete. We then offer an additional three bows from the waist in *gasshō* while standing—*monjin* in Japanese, or what Chinese Buddhists call “half-bows.” The first one is in *gasshō* in gratitude to the Buddha, the second in *shashū* (clasped hands mudra) to the celebrant through whom the Dharma comes, and the third one with clasped hands to each other as the Sangha. We can consider these final bows to be the “hanger” with which we affix the framed photograph to the wall.

To conclude: we have explored the possible origins and development of Buddhist ceremonial. A fundamental intent of a ceremony is honor a great being in the most respectful, reverent, and beautiful way we can. At the same time, the Buddha taught that the best way to worship him was to follow his teaching, so in services we listen to, and express gratitude for, that teaching. Lastly, ceremonial may be considered a unique art form that combines a number of different modes—music, visual arts, writings (usually in verse), and physical movement—in order to create a result and effect greater than any one of these could accomplish alone.



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