

Harmonizing Body-Mind and Buddha Nature: Buddhist Customs and Temple Etiquette

Part of our practice is to refine our body and mind through cultivating appropriate ways of expressing the Buddha Nature when visiting a temple. We often refer to these actions as “etiquette” or “customs,” however such terms trivialize this important attention to detail. These activities go far beyond cultural customs and social manners: they express training body, speech, and mind in the Buddha Way. By applying these means with meditation we harmonize our body-mind with our Buddha nature, the two being fundamentally not separate. Such careful attention to the details of daily life is one of the hallmarks of the Serene Reflection Meditation/Soto Zen tradition. They are the continuation of the ancient bhikkhu and bhikkuni vinaya and the monastic rules of great meditation masters such as Hyakujo in China and Dogen in Japan. Temple etiquette underscores that all actions have a spiritual meaning and effect. The details described here may vary slightly in other temples of our tradition and Order.

In approaching the temple we prepare our minds and hearts for the open reception of the Dharma. Temples in the East often have a “mind-washing” fountain or pond before the entrance. Visitors pause there to wash their hands and drink some water, symbolizing the cleansing of body, speech and mind. This is a form of *sange* – we recognize, acknowledge, and regret our past mistakes and commit ourselves to doing better in the future. We can then ascend the steps with a clear conscience to meet the Buddha. As with all external forms, these activities point to an internal attitude of mind which we cultivate, regardless of whether or not we have the physical “prop” with which to express the activity.

When we enter a temple – or a room of a temple – we pause briefly at the door, make *gassho* (see below), and bow from the waist, called *monjin* in Japanese. This bow expresses our gratitude for the temple or room that allows itself to be used for our training in the Dharma. In Buddhist practice we take nothing for granted and cultivate gratitude for everything. This gratitude is another key characteristic of our Serene Reflection tradition. We also make *monjin* when we leave the room or temple building.

In greeting each other we make *gassho* briefly. *Gassho* is the hand gesture (*mudra*) of bringing the palms together upright in front of one’s chest in a prayerful or reverential manner. The *gassho* expresses our mutual recognition of each other’s Buddha Nature and our gratitude for each other’s training. It reminds us to be still and mindful and to appreciate and value the other person, regardless of our likes and dislikes, opinions and judgments. We often describe the *gassho* as bringing the two halves of the body or mind together, from duality to unity, from separate parts to the One True Self.

When we greet the Prior or other monk(s), we stand, if we are seated, and make *gassho*. Through this greeting we express recognition and appreciation of the commitment that the monastic has made to follow the renunciate path of discipleship. We show our gratitude for his or her taking on the external form and training of Shakyamuni Buddha. Through this act we express our faith in the Unborn, that IT does exist, not only in the distant past but also in the living presence of a human being right now. By so doing we strengthen our recognition of our own inherent Buddha Nature and our potential and ability to follow and live in faith from that Nature. We are all disciples of the Buddha, whether householders or monks – we all seek to liberate others and ourselves from suffering and realize Nirvana. Recognizing the teacher in this way affirms our trust in the Buddhist Dharma and its ability to accomplish that goal. The form of the monastic reminds us of our True Purpose in life – to cleanse our karma, hold to the Precepts, and realize our Unborn Buddha Nature.

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Harmonizing Body-Mind and Buddha Nature, Part 2: In the Meditation Hall

The meditation hall in a temple represents our heart; the temple enclosing it symbolizes the human body. Within the hall we are as still and quiet as possible, just as in formal seated meditation we take up a quiet, relaxed posture so that we can hear and commune with Buddha Nature. The etiquette in a meditation hall cultivates this stillness. Buddhism teaches that body and mind are one. In formal meditation we focus on the mind, and this practice permeates the body. At other times we concentrate on bodily movement and activity, and this effects the mind. Mindful awareness is the critical attribute of both mental and physical training. Without this awareness, formal meditation is dull and empty, and physical activity becomes dead ritual and lifeless movement. Always we keep the mind BRIGHT.

When we enter the hall, we make monjin (bowing from the waist with hands in gassho) to express our gratitude for a place or room in which to sit and meditate. If we cross in front of the main altar, we also pause briefly and make monjin. In laying out a temple we locate the main altar along the central axis running through the temple or hall. The Founder's Shrine directly behind the altar represents the "place" of the Unborn, the Dharma Cloud. Represented there are Buddhist masters of our lineage instrumental in establishing and maintaining our direct connection to the Buddha through the founding of this temple. These masters make possible our encounter with the Dharma in this particular place. The key person there is Rev. Master Jiyu-Kennett, and we have some of her relics there in a small wooden stupa. We also have pictures of her masters in Japan and Malaysia. When we bow in gratitude to the representation of the Unborn Buddha Nature on the main altar, we simultaneously bow to those human beings represented in the Founder's Shrine who made our training possible.

As we approach our sitting place—chair, cushion, bench—we bow from the waist (monjin) in gratitude for its lending itself for our use. It represents our lotus blossom upon or in which we sit, our place of awakening. We take nothing for granted, not even inanimate objects that we "own." We then turn outwards and bow, in gratitude for all the other sangha members gathered in the hall. If others are already seated on either side of us, they make gassho in return as a welcome and to signify their willingness to sit together with us.

At the beginning of the meditation period the person leading the sitting strikes the medium-sized gong three times. In response we make monjin (while seated) toward the wall. This signifies our formal commencement of meditation and our willingness to "let go" of thoughts, opinions, judgments, feelings, etc. and open our hearts to the Unborn. Similarly at the period's end the leader strikes the same gong twice, and we again make seated monjin. Doing so gives form to our gratitude for the time spent in meditation and our commitment to take the meditation into daily life when we get up. After the prior has left the room, we stand up, respectfully straighten our sitting place, bow again towards it, and then bow outwards once again to everyone else.

Why so much emphasis on gratitude and bowing? Rev. Master Jiyu once told us that gratitude is the water that primes the pump of enlightenment. In order to experience the Water of the Spirit and know the Eternal Buddha Nature for ourselves, we put some "water"—gratitude—in the "pump" of training to bring up the fresh cool water deep in the well. Gratitude is not only a precipitant of enlightenment; it is a sign of going in the right direction and a means of getting back on track when we have stumbled or lost our way.

Practicing gratitude also cultivates the positive attitude of mind, the all-acceptance, which opens our hearts to the Unborn. We cannot underestimate its value—it is the "gateless gate" to eternal life. These various movements in the meditation hall bring this to mind. We prime the pump and start the Water flowing freely. In learning and practicing these various points of etiquette, the important thing is the "attitude of gratitude," the perfecting of the Heart, which underlies all that we do. Worldly or external perfection is not the aim.

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