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RITUAL PRACTICE

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## Buddhist Views on Ritual Practice

### Becoming a Real Person

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A monk asked Dong-shan: Is there a practice for people to follow? Dong-shan answered: When you become a real person, there is such a practice (Snyder 1990, 185).

Clack . . . clack . . . clack . . clack . . clack . . clack-clack-clack-clack-clack-clack. The clappers sound to begin the noonday meal for *sesshin*. Rows of black-robed students sit cross-legged along the *tan*, facing out in meditation posture. Two servers enter, carrying folded damp towels. They walk quickly to the back of the zendo, bow to the person at the end of the *tan*, and then race along the meal board, wiping it down for eating. Bowing to the last person, they leave, and the chanting begins. . . . Now I open Buddha *tathagatas*, eating bowls, may all be free from self-clinging. The students unwrap their bowls, and in precise order, square the serving linens, spread the lap napkins, and arrange their bowls, spoon, and chopsticks—everyone following the same procedure. More servers arrive with *gomasio* in small bowls, one per pair of students. The server bows, the eaters bow and accept the offering, they bow together again, go on to the next. Now the homages to Buddha begin:

Homage to Vairocana Buddha, pure Dharmakāya  
Homage to Lochana Buddha, complete Sambhogakāya  
Homage to Shākyamuni Buddha, myriad Nirmāṇa-kāya . . .

The head server brings the meal offerings to the altar and circles them above the incense. The other servers arrive with matching pots of food—three dishes for three bowls. Grain in the Buddha bowl, soup or vegetable in the middle bowl, salad in the third bowl. Bowing to the servers, returning to the breath, keeping the eyes lowered, staying with the breath. When everyone is served, the *kokyo* starts the meal chant.

The three virtues and six tastes of this meal are offered to Buddha and Saṅgha. May all sentient beings in the universe be fully nourished. The students lift their bowls above their heads in unison, following along with each choreographed gesture, one mind in the zendo, attention on practice, dropping off body and mind, just bowing, just eating.

To a new student, *oriyoki* meals are daunting in their complexity and demands. Why is it done this way? Does it really matter which way the chopsticks point? How

can you remember all the little details? How can you meditate while you are trying to perform this ornate ritual? Resistance reveals various aspects of the small complaining self; the point of *oriyoki* is to go beyond the self and just sit. By having a prescribed form for eating, the student is freed from his or her own individual designs and preferences. But such freedom does not come easily. *Oriyoki*, like all Zen rituals, is explained once if at all; the student is then just supposed to practice, practice, practice until it becomes second nature, not asking questions but just trying to do it better and more fully each time. The point of the form is the trying, not the perfecting of it. Those who perfect the performance of the ritual usually smell of the stink of Zen, still exuding ego.

What are the benefits of such a highly choreographed ritual for eating? Certainly the practice cultivates mindful awareness; one must pay attention to what one is doing to avoid making noise while eating, to follow all the signals, to keep up with the group. The rigorous discipline is conducive to supporting *zazen* straight through the meal. The streamlined flow of movements through the *zendo* reduces distraction, leaving one free to concentrate on the moment-to-moment arising of phenomena. If one merges wholeheartedly with the process, the meal itself becomes a lesson in co-dependent arising. Cooks cooking, servers serving, eaters eating—each activity depending on the others. The individual student sees s/he is part of an elaborate group dance of guest and host, a small microcosm of the infinite universe of guest and host.

Traditionally, Zen ritual is a training ground for intensive practice in giving up the small ego-bound self. It is sometimes said that there are three stages of training: Hearing with the Ear, Pondering in the Heart, and Practice with the Body (Schloegl 1977). Ritual is practice with the body. It is the body that needs training to hear more than the urgent messages to preserve itself, messages which have been well honed over evolutionary epochs. Preferences and personal desires are often based on what one's body likes or needs or wishes to avoid. Attaching to these likes and dislikes and the experiences that generate them solidifies a self-centered view of the world. Zen practice aims to break through this conditioning to enable the student to gain a true view of the interpenetrating world in which all phenomena are dependent on others and empty of a separate self.

The practice of specific forms in Zen ritual helps train the student to embody the teachings directly. This allows the student to develop more fully than is possible with only the thinking mind. Rituals present an opportunity to confront the limitations of the mind and body and see into the nature of reality. In addition to this primary training function, Zen ritual helps take care of everyday life and promote healthy *sangha* (community) through sharing the stability and continuity of traditional practice forms. While bowing and chanting, carrying out daily services, the community of monastics and students participate in common forms which generate a culture of the larger body—familiar and supportive.

The practice of Zen is deeply steeped in ritual. There are the mini rituals of daily life such as proper greeting etiquette. Here one bows slightly in passing others or receiving something, holding the palms pressed together in *gassho*, a gesture acknowl-

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edging dualities of good and bad, self and other, absolute and relative—brought together in the union of the hands (Loori 1996, 14). Longer ceremonies follow certain prescribed forms, always including bowing, chanting, incense offering, and the sounding of various instrumental signals. A roll down on the bell signals the beginning of floor bows, a stopped bell tone signals the chant leader to begin. In general there is very little talking or explanation. Rhythms in time and space structure the styles of each lineage. *Rinzai* chanting tends to be fast and vigorous, *Soto* chanting slow and more deliberate. Where and how one walks in the *zendo* marks the shape of the ritual. Silence underlies the sound and movement; the student returns to this place of stillness again and again across the ritual. Posture is central to ceremony, as it is to meditation. Students are expected to hold their hand *mudra* properly, sit upright while chanting, and bow with full attention. Instruction to new students is minimal and often ends with “just follow the others, you’ll get it.”

What do these ritual forms have to do with activity in the world? Certainly some perceive these ritual forms as habit bound and empty, or alternatively, leftover cultural baggage from the Japanese roots. Many students who come to Zen only want to meditate, not to bow, chant, or go through complex ceremonies. Zen teachers, however, will point out that mastering the forms is excellent training for becoming a real person. A real person might be defined as one whose heart is liberated from the bonds of “I” so its inherent worth can flow freely and in full awareness (Schloegl 1977, 82). In practical terms, the liberated person has learned to recognize, accept, and bear with suffering, her own and others. This means s/he is more capable of functioning effectively, with dignity and equanimity, under restrictions or adverse circumstances. Thus the real person is more available to help others as needed, to be present with loss, to reflect the full measure of life energy arising in any situation. The real person trained in Zen has tasted the power in ritual and can help transmit the teachings through ritual forms. In some cases, this may mean translating the forms to meet the needs of the circumstance.

To look at this more closely I will describe a number of traditional Soto Zen ceremonies that are aimed at the purposes of penetrating the Way and supporting the practice place and everyday life. My descriptions are based on my experience practicing at Green Gulch Zen Center north of San Francisco over the past thirteen years; my interpretations are based on various commentaries written and oral, along with my own understanding. Following this I will look at three adaptations of these rituals in social action settings, created by Buddhist activists to generate awareness of the suffering of others.

The primary purpose of all aspects of Zen training is to penetrate the Way, to realize the true nature of things beyond the small views of the separate self. A serious student commits to working closely with a practice leader or teacher who can guide the student toward this realization. There is no set curriculum for this process; everything depends on the student and what is at hand to work with. Ritual forms provide the container for the learning. During meditation retreats and practice periods, students meet with teachers in *dokusan*, or private interviews, to bring up questions, review their progress, and be challenged by a more well-trained mind. In

Rinzai Zen retreats, students may meet as often as three times a day with a teacher as they work on specific *koans*; in Soto Zen it is usually one to three times during the retreat, depending on the teacher's availability.

*Dokusan* ritual prepares the student to meet the teacher with intimacy and respect. In Rinzai Zen, when the *dokusan* bell is sounded during *zazen*, students ready to report leave the zendo briskly to form a line outside the teacher's door. In Soto Zen, a teacher's assistant may tap out those on her list for *dokusan* that period, and only these students leave. Meeting with the teacher brings up uncertainty, doubt, and other strong mental states which are all part of the *dokusan* experience. The teacher rings in one student at a time, the student bows to his or her cushion, enters the *dokusan* room, bows again to the teacher, and takes a seat on the cushion. When the session is over, the student bows again to the teacher and to his or her cushion and leaves the room, returning to the waiting area outside the zendo until the doors are opened for *kinhin*. In following the neutral greeting forms, the student shows the teacher much about his or her state of mind. Aside from these forms, everything else that happens in the *dokusan* room is unpredictable, arising spontaneously from the combination of student, teacher, and circumstances. Zen stories are famous for the shouting, the hitting, the laughing, the dancing that can arise in *dokusan*—anything to bring about insight and awareness. The forms serve to establish a certain boundary around the encounter which respects the depth of intimacy and spontaneity between teacher and student.

The *mondo* ceremony is a larger scale version of the *dokusan* ritual, involving the whole community of students engaging the teacher. These take place during meditation retreats, as a way to increase the pressure of inquiry and generate Great Doubt about the matter of life and death. The intensity of the ceremony depends on each student's willingness to face his or her own deepest questions with utmost sincerity. During a *mondo* ceremony, students line up on either side of the altar facing each other, the teacher taking a central seat. Following specific signals and forms, each student comes forward, bows, and asks the teacher a single succinct question. The teacher listens with whole body and mind and answers the student equally succinctly, from the spontaneous heart. Student and teacher bow to each other, and the student returns to the line. The next one comes forward, and so on around the room until everyone has had the chance to ask a question. Some are playful, some are somber, some are intellectual. In effect, each student is framing his or her own *koan* and bringing it to the teacher for commentary and assistance. By sharing this process in the group, students have a chance to learn from others' questions and behavior. The pressure to find one's own meaningful question(s) is meant to send students back to meditation burning with motivation for practice.

The most serious Zen rituals revolve around the taking of practice vows. After a long period of study with a teacher, a student may ask to receive the precepts and go through the lay ordination ceremony, *Jukai*. This is the culmination of all the meditation, personal study, and *dokusan* sessions, the point of formally entering the life stream of the Buddhas and ancestors in identity with all sentient beings (Loori 1996, 38). Each Zen lineage has its own traditional forms, handed down across the gener-

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ations, transmitted from Japan to the Western world. The student prepares for the ceremony by sewing a small bib-like version of the Buddha's robe, a *rakasu*. Each stitch is a point of concentration, following a repetitive chant, taking refuge in Buddha, becoming one with Buddha. The *rakasu* is the ritualized costume that will mark this new stage of commitment. Before the ceremony, the teacher chooses a Zen name for each student receiving the precepts, a name which both points to the student's nature and the larger universe of the practice field; this is then brush stroked on the back of the *rakasu* with Japanese or English calligraphy. The student may sit in meditation with other students for a day or a week in preparation, raising the *bodhi* mind, facing hindrances and obstacles to making such a commitment.

The ceremony itself, like most ritual forms, cannot be translated well into printed words on a page. Students enter, chanting in low voice, the community sits alert and still, bells call out the timing for bowing and chanting; the zendo is charged, ready to receive this depth of willingness. Teacher and assistant sit at a low table, *rakasu*s and lineage papers at hand, an incense-*kobaku* burning. Following a short talk, the students are asked: Now, will you receive the Threefold Refuge? They recite after the teacher, I take refuge in the Buddha, I take refuge in the Dharma, I take refuge in the Sangha. Then the teacher asks: Now, will you receive the Three Pure Precepts? And again, students chant after the teacher, vowing to follow the basic intention of not causing harm, of doing good, and serving all beings. Last, they receive the Ten Grave or Clear Mind Precepts, vowing in public to follow the guidelines for behavior that support the practice of the Way—Not Killing, Not Stealing, Not Misusing Sexuality, Not Lying, Not Giving or Taking Drugs, Not Discussing the Faults of Others, Not Praising Self while Blaming Others, Not Hoarding, Not Harboring Anger, and Not Defaming the Three Treasures. Having committed to follow the Buddha's Way, each student comes forward to receive his or her *rakasu* and new name. Together they recite the verse of the *rakasu* to deepen their commitment to the teachings of liberation. The ceremony is complete with chanting of the Heart Sutra, more bows and bells, and, as in *dokusan*, the container closes with the last round of bows. The teachings have been transmitted; the student takes a big step toward becoming a real person.

What happens in this rite of passage? How does the ceremony itself help the student to develop as a person? Could one practice the precepts without going through the ceremony? Yes, certainly, but the public act of making a commitment in the container of the ritual pushes the student out of the familiar comfort zone and into the uncomfortable realm of the unknown. Because this experience can be daunting, the ceremony provides a kind of shelter for the "seedling" Buddha just starting out. Following the precepts is clearly a very challenging if not impossible task; one is bound to fail on a daily basis. Those participating in the ceremony understand the seriousness of the commitment and are there to offer encouragement and support for the sincere student embarking on the path. Thus it is clear from the start that one practices in the company of others, and that through sincere effort the precepts can help to protect oneself and society from harm. American Zen teacher Richard Baker describes the act of taking the precepts in Jukai as turning us around—in the

very seat of being. It is an act of seeing our life, recognizing our existence, and taking responsibility for it. Precepts turn us into more “human” beings and sometimes into Buddhas. In this sense, taking the precepts is both a step on the path and an act of realization (Baker 1993, 156–157).

The second purpose of Zen ritual is to support mindful awareness in everyday life. Daily, monthly, and yearly rituals keep community life cared for over the course of the year and help students maintain a practice orientation in a busy schedule. At Green Gulch Zen Center, for example, the meal chant is recited daily at breakfast as an abbreviated version of the long *sesshin* service. Staff begin daily work assignments by bowing in at their work altars, and then bowing out at the end of the work period. Morning service and *soji*, or cleaning, helps keep zendo life ordered and clean. Once a month there is a Full Moon precepts and repentance ceremony to help the community stay current with its practice commitments. Once a year the center celebrates various important days in the Buddhist calendar, marking the cycling of time in the endless round. Here I’ll describe two of these annual ceremonies—New Year’s and Buddha’s Birthday—as they play a role in regenerating the wider community supporting the temple.

New Year’s is a very big celebration in Japan, and many of the traditions carry over in Western Zen temples of Japanese lineage. Preparations begin a week or two in advance, making festive decorations and special foods including hand-pounded rice balls or mochi. In households and temples, a thorough housecleaning takes place right before New Year’s—dusting the ceilings, washing all the dishware, and beating the tatami mats. All fires are put out and then relighted on New Year’s, sometimes ceremonially from the temple fire. The passage from the old to the new year is marked by ringing the large *bonsho* bell 108 times. At Green Gulch this is done as people are meditating in the zendo, giving a kind of solemn air to the changeover. But then afterwards, there is a big bonfire with hot drinks and everyone gathers around to visit and celebrate. Old altar cards marking the deaths of loved ones during the previous year are ceremonially burned in the fire, clearing the altars and releasing the dead to travel on. New Year’s Day begins with a ceremonial procession around all the altars to bless them and offer incense for the New Year. This is followed by festive eating and a sake toast for good luck.

New Year’s is one of the most popular ceremonies at Green Gulch. Many people are glad to find an alternative to the whooping it up that characterizes the commercial holiday. Three to four hundred people crowd into the zendo for midnight meditation, aligning themselves with the darkness at the turning of the year. They bring their home altar cards to burn and find some comfort in their losses by sharing them with others. At some American temples, students are encouraged to invite a local priest in to offer a New Year’s blessing by offering incense at the home altars and chanting throughout the newly cleaned house. The ceremony serves the community as well as the temple in releasing the suffering of the old year and establishing good intentions for the new year. It marks the passage of time and provides an anchor point on the calendar for beginning anew and renewing one’s commitment to practice.

Buddha’s Birthday on April 8 (or the closest Sunday) is another popular cere-

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mony at Green Gulch and at many Zen temples, much because it is a family celebration, welcoming children to participate in the life of the temple. At Green Gulch many elaborate elements have evolved over the years, including a full-blown pageant, costumes and all, telling the story of the Buddha's birth (Johnson 1994). Before the entertainment, the abbot and priests form a procession onto the lawn to an outdoor altar laden with fruit and flowers. They offer incense, food, and tea on behalf of the Buddha and all beings, and then invite the children to proceed in with the elephant cart filled with flowers. There is chanting, of course, and a long dedication listing all the wildflowers on the hills, and then everyone comes up to bathe the baby Buddha with sweet tea under the flower-bedecked pagoda. After the pageant, when all the props and instruments have been cleared away, people stay for a picnic while the Green Gulch dragon is flown in the windy skies.

This annual ceremony is more than fun for the kids; it carries the full joy of beginner's mind: anyone and everyone is a baby Buddha and deserves celebration and recognition for their tender wholehearted efforts to live a life of awareness. The festivities honor the historic Buddha, giving thanks for his enormous contribution in bringing the Dharma to people's lives. This ceremony is one of three annual ceremonies dedicated to the Buddha's life; the others are his enlightenment day on December 8 and his *paranirvana* day or day of entering Nirvāna through death on February 15. Buddha's Birthday helps create community bonds and in the West contributes to the development of Buddhist culture within a Judeo-Christian society.

Once the monk Xiushan asked, "What can we do about the world?" Dizang answered, "What do you call the world?" (Baker 1993, 148). How exactly do rituals and ceremonies such as these make any difference in the activity of the world? One could say it depends on what you mean by world. In one sense the world is what you carry with you into every interaction—awareness of one's worldviews, of suffering, of insight, and compassion. Or you could define the world as the realm of political and economic activity, much of which is destructive or harmful to human life. How can Buddhist rituals address this world of suffering? Let's look at three ceremonies that were adapted for just such a purpose, both at the Zen temple and also off-site.

Earth Day 1990 brought a flurry of action to mark the twenty-year anniversary of the original celebration. Organizers drew attention to dramatic losses in species, forests, riverways, ocean health, atmosphere stability. A call went out for religions to get involved; at Green Gulch Zen Center we decided to do our part. We were inspired by the religious protests of Thai monks over the logging of their village forests; they had taken to ordaining trees in the forest as a way to protect the community land. Wrapping the largest trees in the orange cloth of the monks, they recited the refuges and precepts and proclaimed the trees ordained, as if they were priests (Taylor 1993). We wanted to stand in solidarity with their actions, so we designed a precepts ceremony to ordain the central coast live oak near the zendo. The abbot, the head gardener, and I, an activist with the Buddhist Peace Fellowship, reworked the basic Jukai ceremony to more consciously include all beings (Kaza and Johnson 1990). On the appointed Earth Day in April, temple members and visitors joined us after the morning lecture for a full-scale precepts ceremony—held outside

by the tree. We did our own version of wrapping the tree, and made our precept vows in its company. The fresh wording and the change of place for the ceremony were a wake-up call to pay attention more deeply to the plight of the trees. These ecological precepts have since been reprinted in journals and books, perhaps inspiring other ceremonies like this elsewhere.

Two years later, in 1992, the Buddhist Peace Fellowship held its annual meeting in Vermont on Columbus Day weekend. That year the holiday was marked with protests and resistance by native peoples and those standing behind them. They claimed it marked 500 years of colonization with devastating impacts on native peoples; they did not want their stories of suffering erased in American history books. Considering the BPF mission to bring a Buddhist perspective to peace and justice issues, we worked with the local teacher, Sunyana Graef, to design an appropriate repentance ceremony. We followed the Rochester Zen Center repentance ritual (parallel to the Full Moon ceremony mentioned earlier), but focused on the specific aspects of repentance as colonizers and colonized peoples. After sitting quietly in the zendo to prepare ourselves, we bowed and did walking meditation past the altar objects drawing attention to these struggles. Then we chanted three times the verses of avowal:

All my ancient twisted karma  
From beginning less greed, hate, and delusion  
Born through body, speech, and mind  
I now fully avow.

We passed the incense bowl around the circle and each person spoke of the suffering related to colonization that they had helped to cause or were part of. The kaleidoscope of perspectives captured the full range of turmoil—living in a colonized land under a colonizing government with friends and family who were descendants of the European newcomers. The ceremony allowed us to be present with the suffering, not deny or ignore it, while also holding ourselves responsible for the consequences of our own actions. It was powerful and sobering to see the transformed ceremony speak to the immediate state of the world.

Two more years later, in 1994, the Buddhist Peace Fellowship again adapted a traditional ceremony to a new situation, this time at the Nevada Test Site for nuclear weapons (Senauke 1994). During the weekend retreat, the days were organized around walking and sitting meditation, with time for an official tour of the test site. Many religious and nonreligious activists have traveled to this desert site outside Las Vegas to protest the harmful destruction of life through nuclear weapons and the usurpation of native lands without a formal treaty. This weekend fell on Buddha's Birthday, so the protesters developed a Buddha's Birthday ceremony for the test site. They built a small altar out of stones and sat in a circle around it. As they came forward to bathe the baby Buddha, they offered blessings of purification to the scarred desert and to all beings harmed by nuclear weapons and weapons production. The ceremony prepared people for the difficult decision that followed, about whether or

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not to cross the federal boundary line and be arrested for trespassing. At the last bell, those who had chosen civil disobedience crossed the line, bowing deeply to those who stayed back. The power of the ceremony held the protesters in the lineage of Zen followers, giving them strength and courage. Through this creative experiment, Buddhist tradition took yet another form, serving effectively the needs of the immediate situation.

Who can say how these three rituals affected the activity of the world? Which world? Which activity? Those who participated reported new insights, shifts of perspective, courage to speak up and engage the suffering. By changing the language, the forms, or location, the rituals came alive in a new way. By bringing religious tradition to bear on the suffering of the world, new windows opened for action and reflection. Activists influenced priests, priests influenced Zen communities; hopefully the Zen students carried the energy forward to influence the civic world. With ceremonies, there are no guarantees how they will work in the world. The container is there, the invitation to awareness is there, but the spark of receptivity varies widely from student to student and situation to situation.

When they work, Zen ceremonies are watersheds, hinge moments . . . when it is clear to us . . . we have passed through some gateway and entered a new universe (Ross 1995/6, 3). The participant and the ritual become one event, no separation, no barriers, all dualistic relationships dropped away. As Shunryu Suzuki said of bowing, "When you become one with Buddha, as with everything that exists, you find the true meaning of being. When you forget all your dualistic ideas, everything becomes your teacher" (Suzuki 1970). This is the heart of becoming a real person—being completely willing to work with the world as it is—messy, imperfect, confused, full of suffering. Bowing to this, the possibilities for transformation are everywhere.

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