
The meaning of rituals

Teisho of Roland Yuno Rech at La Gendronnière on Wednesday, August 27, 2008

Why do we do ceremonies? What is the meaning of the rituals?

The rationale of this teisho is a conversation I overheard this morning after the gen mai, which alerted me to the fact that some of you were a bit irritated by discovering once again some changes in our rituals. For some, this will go so far as to introduce doubts in their minds about the meaning of their practice and their participation. I thought it was important enough to talk about it right away.

I will speak at several levels: firstly about the importance or necessity of ceremonies, of recitation or even the study of the sutras. And secondly, in a more practical vein, I shall discuss the reason why, in the last four to five years, you have been witness to periodic changes in the ritual, here at the Gendronnière or even in the various sanghas. First I will try to clarify what is the need for change, if any, or the meaning of it, if there is one. Then I will answer your questions.

The need for ceremonies

To begin with, concerning the need for ceremonies or recitation of the sutras, I would say that my position is exactly the same as Nyojo reported by Dogen in the Hokyoki. When questioned by Dogen, Nyojo said: 'The essence Zen is the practice of zazen, body and spirit completely stripped, *shin jin datsu raku*'.

Nyojo then adds: 'It is not necessary to burn incense, to pay homage to Shakyamuni Buddha, the patriarchs, etc., or recite the *nembutsu* (which was in vogue at the time of Dogen and Nyojo: "*Namu Amida Butsu*" which is repeated like a mantra). It is also not necessary to do penance and repent, nor to read or recite the sutras. Only sit in zazen, with one mind: *shikantaza*.'

In the following mondo, Dogen asks: 'But what does *shin jin datsu raku* mean?'

So Nyojo insists by saying: '*Shin jin datsu raku* is zazen: when you do zazen with one mind, that is to say, totally focused, absorbed in the practice of zazen, you are freed from the five desires and you eliminate the five obstacles.' That is to say that you are truly awake, liberated.

This is the very meaning of Buddha's teaching, as he transmitted it: to free oneself from the causes of suffering and thus be able to awaken to the reality as it is. This is clearly the essence of Zen that was transmitted from Nyojo to Dogen, and from Dogen to all the masters of transmission up to Kodo Sawaki, Master Deshimaru and ourselves.

I think we have no doubt about it. In any case, I do not.

So from that point of view then, we can say that zazen is the essence, we could just do zazen only: there is no need for ceremonies or even to study, sing or recite sutras.

To continue in this line of argument, I will refer to a famous mondo between a monk and Master Gensha.

The monk asked Gensha: 'Are the Three Vehicles – the first being the listeners Vehicle, shravaka of those who are awakened through the study of the Four Noble Truths; the second being that of Pratyeka Buddha awake solitary, usually awake by understanding emptiness, through the understanding of the Twelve Innens, the Twelve Causes interdependent; the third is that of the bodhisattva vehicle whose fundamental practice and source of enlightenment is the practice of Paramita – so do these three vehicles, asks the monk, and the Twelve Kinds of Scripture – because all teachings Buddha were listed, this resulted in a ranking of the sutra scriptures and in twelve categories, Twelve Kinds of scripture – then do it all, is that it is not necessary? And what about the sense of Western Bodhidharma coming?'

And Gensha confirms: 'The Three Vehicles and the Twelve kinds of Scriptures are not needed.'

In other words, studying the sutras and all the Buddha's teachings is not necessary.

The last question of the monk is explained by the fact that long ago the opinion, particularly in the Zen school and especially the Rinzai Zen, that the coming of Bodhidharma from India to China introduced a service of Dharma deeper than the various aspects of Buddha's teaching presented by the Three Vehicles and the Twelve Kinds of Scripture, which includes all sutras.

It also said that the special transmission Mahakashyapa Buddha outside of the Scriptures, with the famous silent mondo where Buddha simply twirled a flower between his fingers and Mahakashyapa smiled. In the transmission of Zen, this fact is considered the origin of what is called the transmission *i shin den shin*, direct transmission beyond words, beyond the sutra, heart to heart, mind to mind.

And the coming of Bodhidharma in China, about a millennium after transmission from Buddha to Mahakashyapa, was the renewal of the transmission *i shin den shin* and confirmed the superiority of this transmission beyond scriptures, in silence. In the case of course Bodhidharma, the transmission is made through the silent practice of zazen facing the wall, and Eka has just received prostrate in sanpai as Mahakashyapa had simply smiled seeing the gesture of turning the flower.

Ceremonies that are unnecessary but useful and complementary

So there is this view that if we understand the meaning of this *i shin den shin* transmission, everything else is not necessary. One can even also wonder if zazen is still necessary. And Dogen, who addresses this question confirms the view of Gensha saying that, indeed, when the Dharma wheel turns, it's the rotation of what is not necessary. At the same time, in this rotation of the wheel of Dharma, we find all the teachings of Buddha.

And Dogen insists that 'not necessary' does not mean we cannot use them, and that we should discard them. Conversely, we can say that in fact, it is because it is not needed, that they can be used freely. The essence of Buddha Dharma, is to achieve this dimension where nothing is required, which means the *mushotoku* dimension, the dimension in which there is no need to add something to reality as it is being actualized from moment to moment, especially in the practice of zazen.

It is not because it is not necessary that we will not practice the rituals. This non-necessity gives us the freedom to do only zazen and nothing else. But that does not mean we will do zazen all day and nothing else; it does not mean it is not useful or meaningful to express what is achieved in the practice of zazen, particularly through the ceremonies, and through all the

gestures of everyday life, the *gyoji*, and in so doing find the expression of what is realized in zazen, in the sutras and through all the teachings of the Twelve Scriptures.

In other words, ceremonies, sutras, are expressions of what is contained, involved in the practice of zazen, in the realization of zazen. This is *Dotoku*, the expression of the Way.

Realizing this is one thing, expressing it is another. And both are, I would not say necessary, but complementary.

Precisely in the *Dotoku* of the *Shobogenzo*, Dogen says, 'When the Way is realized, it is expressed spontaneously.'

And, of course, it can be expressed not only in the ceremonies but throughout the course of action in everyday life. So in that case, what is the point of the ceremonies themselves?

I believe that the ceremonies are not necessary but useful, as soon as there is a gathering of a community of practitioners of the Way. They help to harmonize the community: we meet regularly to sing, recite the sutras. Through this recitation, learning to sing not only with the mouth but with the ears; and in so doing, to listen, to harmonize with others. Moreover, the meaning of all that we sing is completely connected to the practice of zazen: the *Hannya Shingyo*, the *Sandokai* are completely the expression of the essence of the experience of zazen. I will not dwell on it: it would take several *sesshin kusen*, which have already been made to explain it.

In this particular case, the rituals can be helpful. But they can be a cause of confusion if they occupy too much space, take too much importance in the *gyoji*; or if they end up virtually replacing zazen as is the case in some Japanese temples. In order to have more time for rituals, the duration of zazen is significantly reduced, or else ceremonies are performed for the lay practitioners, who make *fuse* for this, and we reserve the practice of zazen for the monks. It is this kind of deviation that can completely distort both the meaning of the ceremonies and the sense of what is truly the essence of Zen.

So what about the meaning of the ceremonies? What about the fact, in particular, that several things are recited during a ceremony?

It is precisely because we have been attending Japanese masters, doing *sesshin* in Japan or doing *ango* here that we understand better and better the meaning of the ritual, and this in turn has led us periodically to make small changes to try to be more accurate in what we do. It must be said, to better understand the context, that Master *Deshimaru* when he came to Europe in 1967, had only been ordained as a monk for a year. He had a long practice of zazen but as a lay practitioner; he went to *sesshins* with Master *Kodo Sawaki*, but he had little experience of life in temples. So he created... Moreover, he had no specific plans to introduce a Zen ritual because he thought it was not at all suited to the European mentality – I think he was right, so he started very simply. First he recited the *Hannya Shingyo*, then after he added the Four Vows of the *Bodhisattva*, etc.

At the end, when he died, we were basically singing the *Hannya Shingyo* three times and then the Four Vows of the *Bodhisattva*, the *Eko* and the *Ji Ho San Shi*.

A first change was made after his death because we said: after all, you do not have to sing all the time *Hannya Shingyo* three times; there are other sutras that can be sung, that are very significant in our tradition. And then were added the *Sandokai* and alternately the

Hokyozanmai and the Daishin Darani. Then, instead of singing a relatively short Eko which summarizes the lineage, we started singing the complete Buddha Shakyamuni lineage until Keizan, then Kodo Sawaki, Master Deshimaru and in my Sangha, Niwa Renpo Zenji. This was the first change. The goal was not to prolong the ceremonies, but to vary a little, instead of singing the same thing all the time. And for a long time in sesshins we sang in addition to the Hannya Shingyo, either the Sandokai, the Hokyozanmai, or the Daishin Darani. We even started singing the Kannon Gyo, always alternately. And alternatively also the Patriarchs.

Another aspect is that each of these sutras is dedicated to specific beings. This is an opportunity to deepen a little more the meaning of the ritual.

Rituals in Zen are not accomplished for acquiring merits and they are not necessary. They are really performed with a *mushotoku* mind: we do not expect to gain anything by them, but are the expression of at least three things, and sometimes more.

The first thing is expressed through the Hannya Shingyo is truly the deepest dimension of the awakening of zazen: wisdom. The sutra of the Hannya Shingyo is the expression of wisdom and compassion as manifested when we practice zazen deeply.

Another important feeling expressed during the ceremony is gratitude, that is to say, thanking Buddha for having opened the path of practice as we continue zazen.

In temples in Japan where there is a series of sutras sung in the morning ceremony, there is an eko after each sutra, because each sutra is intended to express gratitude or another feeling toward some people.

The Hannya Shingyo is intended for Buddha and the founders. This morning we raised the question of who were the four great benefactors. As shown in the abbreviated eko, these benefactors are: Buddha, Bodhidharma, Dogen and Keizan. These are usually the four founders to which we express our gratitude by singing the Hannya Shingyo.

Then we express our gratitude to the entire lineage of the Patriarchs, and sing either after the Hokyozanmai or the Sandokai. As far as we are concerned, we usually stop there. For many it is already too much! So we will not add anything else.

But in Japan traditionally a third sutra is sung for parents, families and ancestors. It expresses once again gratitude for parents, family, and ancestors. If our ancestors had not lived and had not given us life, we would not be here practicing the Way. So naturally after zazen, we thank our parents for allowing us, by giving us life, to practice the Way.

And there is a fourth category of people who might have a sutra, sometimes in the form of a kito, dedicated to them, e.g. the Daishin Darani. These are the sick and also the dead. In this case it is not gratitude we express for the sick or the dead, but compassion.

So three feelings or spiritual values are expressed in the ceremony: the actualization of wisdom, compassion and gratitude.

But why do ceremonies change? To put it simply, because we understand better their meaning. And not, in my case, because we should have more of them and longer ones. But I think we have to perform them in the best possible manner and develop the meaning and coherence of what we do in keeping with the meaning it has for us.

For those of you who are offended because ceremonies often change, or even change all the time, I would insist that basically the Buddha Way is the Way of *mujo*, impermanence. This is the way that teaches us to harmonize with impermanence, to achieve a gentle, flexible mind, that does not stagnate, nor crystallize on things that we believe we control, and which we want to take as a support, without questioning them.

Obviously it's annoying when one says, 'I thought I knew how to strike the small bell; and there is a change and we will have to relearn again.' I understand very well that it is tiresome or even a source of irritation. But we should keep things in perspective.

But you still have to understand that, accepting the fact that there is change, is also part of practice and of enlightenment.

What can we actually do in our dojo?

Now let us turn to more specific issues: you come to the Gendronnière and you hope to go back with a clearer idea of what you are going to practice in your dojo. This is normal: for this is like our head temple here, where we come to enquire and train.

Each Godo, each sangha probably has his way of seeing things but for me, I think the practice in the Gendronnière comes closer and closer to a temple practice. It is the place where one can get to know and experience how the ritual is practiced in a temple. But in the dojos which are in town, there is not much time for zazen in the morning and we cannot afford to add more rituals. It's not necessary.

On top of that, most people who come to Zen, often come to it because they were disappointed with their original religion and find it too ritualized, as Catholicism for instance. We come to Zen because we think it's simpler, it's basically just sitting, just meditating. You do not come there to spend a lot of time doing rituals, even if I do think that a minimum of rituals is a good thing.

If you feel that it's more important to have a long morning zazen and then just ring the bell and leave, or do sanpai and go, it is possible. There is no obligation to do a ritual.

Similarly, if you create a new zazen group, with lots of beginners that you do not want to bother with ceremonies at the end of zazen, a quick strike of the bell, and it's over. That's enough, no need to do more.

But in general, for well-established dojos with a sangha where there are already monks and nuns, you can sing, as we do in Nice or during a weekend sesshin, the Kesa Sutra, followed by the Hannya Shingyo and alternately either the Sandokai or the Hokyozanmai or the eko of the Patriarchs, or the eko corresponding to what was sung, and the *Ji Ho San Shi*. If you are in a hurry, you can do as Master Deshimaru did at the Paris Dojo where we just sang a Hannya Shingyo, the Four Vows, the *Shigu Sei*, the Eko and *Ji Ho San Shi*.

Again, if you're really in a hurry, you can do nothing! No problem. It is the basis. If you understand that there is no need, then you can freely practice and consider the ceremonies as a means among others to express the realization of zazen, that is to say, gratitude, compassion, wisdom, the ability to be attentive and to harmonize with others. All this is expressed both in the samu, in the acts of daily life, the meals taken together, the respect due to others in daily life, in public places, toilets, the bar, the rooms, etc.

In fact the entire universe is a place where we can express the realization of the Way which is not limited to a small ritual that takes place in a dojo, a restricted space, cut off from the rest of the world.

It's the same with the sutras. We talked about the twelve kinds of scripture: all the sutras are absolutely not limited to the writings and words of the Buddha. In fact, all phenomena are sutras. The herbs, the trees, the lake, the sun, the moon, the stars, all the phenomena of daily life, meals, work: all these are sutras. They actualize the ultimate truth.

And if, through the practice of zazen, we open ourselves to the intuition of this reality, we can find it everywhere.

And 'everywhere' becomes a sutra and the opportunity to express the awakening of zazen, beyond formalized rituals that take place in a dojo.

That's what I wanted to say.

Questions

As this is a subject a little 'bright', where now two, three questions I want to answer, if it's fast...

Q1: What bothers me actually in ceremonies is the question of language.

A: Indeed, we are frequently criticized for singing in Chinese, or Japanese. This is justified. But there are two reasons why this singing in Chinese or Japanese is kept. The first is that our Sangha is international. Here, there are English, German, Italian, Flemish, Spanish speakers... If we began to sing in French, there are people who could not sing with us, because they do not know the language. We can say that Chinese is a little like our Latin, the universal language but I do not exclude at all that in the dojos, you could try to recite sutras in French. The problem is how to find the musicality, the rhythm. There are people who worked on it, it's not easy but it can be done. There is an interesting idea that I have applied: instead of singing two sutras you could try to read its translation before singing it. I remind you that the translations of all the sutras we sing are available. Moreover, when you sing you have no time to think, this is not the time for reflection but time for expressing. It's more important at this time to be in harmony with others to sing with the *hara*, to be in with your expiration. And this is why syllables, monosyllables in the sutras, as in the Hannya Shingyo: 'kan/ji/zai ...' lend themselves well to chant and sing with the *hara*, much better than French or English.

These are the reasons why we still continue to sing in Chinese.

Q2: You said just now that Master Deshimaru did not want to introduce the ceremonies in Europe because he was afraid that there would be a zen duality.

A: Yes, this happens in all cases in which a Zen practice focuses on ceremonies to the point they are given as much importance, if not more, than zazen. That is ritualized Zen.

—So Now, why there would be no fear there, that fear to focus precisely the forms?

—This is a useful form fear: fear is not only a negative emotion but is an emotion that alerts us to danger. So it's good to have fear, to be afraid of making mistakes, afraid of falling into forms of perversion, it keeps our minds alert.