

Bowing the Body of the Way

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This body is nothing other than the Way itself. Composed of subatomic particles, cells, hair, blood and bone, it comes and goes. Bright and miraculous, it does what it does: elbow bends, hand gestures, eye sees, stomach digests, anus excretes. When the body is purely the body, and the mind is purely the mind, there are no obstacles for each and they are not obstacles to each other. The single bodymind reveals itself. Dogen zenji wrote: "With the single bodymind see sights, with the single bodymind hear sounds". When this seeing is just seeing, this hearing just hearing, where is this bodymind? Dropping off the bodymind, where do you stand? Step from off this one hundred foot pole into free air, and instantly all beings wake up and get to work.

This body is the posture, or asana, or mudra of the Way. Slumped and folded into itself, the Way becomes narrow and crooked, and it is hard for beings to pass through to liberation. Back straight, mind clear, weight evenly distributed, the Way is broad and supple and all beings are carried naturally.

It is easy to see how posture affects attitude and attitude affects posture. An attitude of clear and spacious awareness is a little like Buddha Mind and is easily manifested by a clear and erect posture. A clear and erect posture is a little like the natural ease with which the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas work with situations, to cultivate the insight of beings.

Realize this attitude and posture at all times: in sitting, sit straight; in walking, make a complete step; in lying, lie down; in bowing, just bow.

Why do we bow? We do not bow to curry favour with invisible Buddhas or the Lineage of Ancestors who have transmitted this Way through their own lives. Although the more that we practice, the more our gratitude for being able to practice is awakened towards the Teacher and the Lineage of Teachers, this is not why we bow. We don't bow to make ourselves humble or devotional, or blissful, or holy, or cute. We don't bow because of culture, although culture may influence the style with which we bow.

We bow because this body is nothing other than the Way itself, and bowing can show us parts of this Way.

In some Lineages of Buddhism, such as the Tibetan Buddhist schools, bowing is done in conjunction with filling the imagination with complex visualized pictures, filling the mouth and mind with mantra, filling the emotions with feelings of reverence and repentance. Filling ourselves with various techniques can perhaps numb the self-obsessive qualities of the usual mind, but it can also numb the mind itself; although intended to cultivate wholesome qualities, these techniques may just foster hothouse growths onto barren soil. In this Way, we can have no images about ourselves, we just bow as we are, and in this bowing, uncover what is naturally there. Perhaps there might be resentment, boredom, doubt, fatigue, self-consciousness. Who? Who is it that resents? Even if we can't completely penetrate this question, we still contact the Way and sense our dignity, clarity and a simple open-heartedness. Whether we penetrate, or merely sense, is up to us. In any case we don't want to trade in the honesty and simplicity of these qualities for the pomp and grandeur of worship, because if we did, we would only end up feeling purified and holy, instead of being aware and

gentle. It is because we don't cultivate holiness that we are free to recognize the immense sacredness of things as they are, of the whole moment unbound by imagery and concept.

We also do not use such techniques mixed in with our bowing, because if we did so, we would sooner or later have to face the fact that we were cranking up the appropriate emotions in response to objects of worship that we have cranked up. Seeing the limits of this and smelling something fishy we would become discouraged and give up on bowing, and that would be a shame because we wouldn't learn then what bowing has to teach us.

When Yasuda roshi first introduced me to bowing practice I was a young teenager who had no doubt that this was merely a cultural relic and had nothing to do with Buddhism, and less than that with Zen. I had all kinds of ideas about what Zen meant, and I wasn't particularly pleased to be taken outside of the limitations that I imposed. As a result, I spent most of the movements ignoring them as much as possible. I bowed with doubt, with resentment, with embarrassment, with boredom, with boredom, with boredom.

I spoke to him about this and he grinned and said: "Well, feel just as much resentment as you feel; just don't let it interfere with your bowing. Bow through a resentful mind, bow through a bored mind. Your feelings will come and go. Bowing practice is always the same. Mind is bored, mind is restless. Where did boredom come from, where does it go? Who is aware of boredom? Who bows?"

As bowing as a practice is found in all Lineages of the Buddha Dharma in many cultures, various styles and approaches have evolved. In the Tibetan Buddhist lineages, one-hundred-thousand prostrations form part of the ngondro (preliminaries) which ripen one for more complex levels of practice, through purifying karma and cultivating further openness to the transmission of the Teachings. It is also used there as a way for pilgrims to intensify the devotion and energy of their journeys to sacred sites, and so on. In Theravadin countries, it is used as a customary greeting to bhikkhus and Teacher, forms a part of the daily puja of laypersons, and is often used as a mindfulness and insight practice. In Thien, Son, Chan, and Zen, it is used in much the same way.

There are many different kinds of bows to be made: bows made from the hips with the hands held in gassho to the altar in the Zendo, to the Teacher, to other students, to the place where we have practised. With all of these, there are slight differences in how the hands are held, and in the depth of the bow.

And then there is the Great Bow, the bow which carries one to the ground and up again. These bows are made to the altar at the beginning, or end, or both, of Zazen, during extended chanting practices. Traditionally they are also offered to the Teacher in dokusan (although for our purposes we use only the standing and kneeling bows). These Great Bows also present us with a practice in their own right just as do zazen, walking, chanting and working.

We bow in the direction of the altar, or wherever we have made room for a practice place. The altar acts like the hub of a wheel, the central point from which turn our activities which benefit beings. Although it is just a table or shelf with a rupa or calligraphy on it, and is no more (just as) sacred than as anything else, it acts as a place where we focus our commitment to practice-realization. When we bow, we bow to the Buddhas and Ancestors or our Lineage, although this is not why we bow. In bowing, we uncover the Ordinary Mind of the Buddhas and Awakened Ancestors and, with a shock of recognition and profound gratitude as we become what we are, we bow as the Buddhas and Awakened Ancestors.

Standing upright, allow your lower back to arch slightly to support the chest with shoulders held naturally straight. Your feet are set about a fist apart, and your weight is evenly distributed. Inhaling gently, bring your hands smoothly together in gassho, with your elbows out from the body. As your hands approach each other and the fingertips touch, feel how attentiveness becomes roused; to connect with this, rest your gaze lightly on the tips of your middle fingers, keeping the peripheral vision open.

When we bow, we are offering something; we are offering the dignity of our posture, the simplicity and clarity of awareness and, as always, whatever discursive imagery is shushing around in our thoughts. Recognizing Awareness, we realize that because this is what it is, it cannot be grasped, cannot be held on to, and therefore we offer it.

Never begin a bow by slumping into it. You should begin and complete a bow, or anything else you do, thoroughly. Don't act like you are doing existence a favour by being alive. No matter how you may have seen anyone else bow at any monastery or centre, don't let your bow be cowardly mindless action. No matter how well you may bow, how mindful or whatever, don't be proud of it and compare it to anyone else's. This is a bow, after all. Such comparisons sever the energy of the seventh Precept, and reveal a tangle-limbed hairy demon still chewing his mother's fresh heart, all decked out as a Zen student.

When your gassho is complete, begin to bow from the waist, as you would for a standing bow, but allow yourself to be carried to the ground. Exhaling gently, bend your knees and allow your right knee to contact the ground a fraction of a moment before your left knee. To someone watching, there should be little or no discernible difference between right and left knees touching the ground, but it is nevertheless a point to maintain, as part of the attentiveness we pay to this practice.

Your gassho now parts and, still exhaling, you touch the ground with your right elbow, and left elbow, right palm, left palm, and forehead, in that sequence. Smoothly, turn your hands palm up and, without curling the fingers or bending the wrists, lift them slowly to beside your ears and then back to the ground. This motion symbolizes lifting the feet of the seated Buddha over your head, which was a traditional Indian mark of respect. If you find this meaning uncomfortable, simply think of it as lifting up and offering the bow itself, to Awareness itself, as Awareness itself, for the benefit of all beings. In other words, just lift your hands and put them down again. During this part of the bow, you are neither exhaling nor inhaling, but you are also not holding your breath. Simply be without breath and rest in this, as you lift and lower your hands.

Now inhale gently and rise with your hands in gassho. It might take some practice before your balance in this is even. Stand tall and repeat the bow.

These Great Bows are done in rounds of three, before and after main zazen sessions. If you have been asked to do them as main practice, in addition to root the practice of zazen, then they are to be done in rounds of twenty-five, fifty, one-hundred, and so on. When doing extended bowing, you might find that breathing becomes very forced and out of sync with your movements, and that the space between inhalation and exhalation has become gasping. If this happens, merely pause between three or seven bowing sequences and, with hands still in gassho, take a breath to adjust yourself.

Any specific problems or adjustments to the practice will be taken up in dokusan. Many of the details discussed in this text are from the secret oral Teachings (kuden) of Dogen's Zen Lineage, as transmitted to me by Yasuda Joshu Dainen roshi, and verified by my own experience. Further Teachings are transmitted to

the student as his or her bowing matures, and so will not be recorded here.

Bowing practice joins together two necessary types of practice; samatha and vipasyana. Samatha is a clean mind, free of coarse distraction and dullness, and this is fostered by attending carefully, moment to moment, to movement, breath and attitude. Vipasyana is the cutting edge of insight, which penetrates each moment and movement completely, seeing clearly that there is no trace, no place to stay, no staying. Breath comes and goes, movements come and go, thoughts come and go, realizations and experiences come and go. Only the process of bowing is the same and, even there, sooner or later our bowing ends, and we move on to liberating beings in the next moment and in the next way.