

# Opening the Bowls

Dharma Assembly led by Ven. Jinmyo Renge sensei  
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Some 14 years ago [now 27 years ago, in 1990], Zen Master Anzan Hoshin took me into the Zendo at our previous monastery Zazen-ji and gave me instruction in oryoki practice. He did not say very much about oryoki beforehand, because it is really something that one needs to do to understand, just as zazen must be done to be understood. Anzan Hoshin roshi and Joshu Dainen daiosho's translation of Eihei Dogen zenji's "Fushukuhanpo", which you were all asked to read, contains a great deal of information about oryoki, so I will keep this Dharma Talk quite brief. One thing that Roshi did say to me is that eventually, when lifting the fuhatsu or Buddha bowl, the first bowl, and concluding the chant, I would find that is a very tender, vulnerable, powerful, and profound moment. I could understand what he meant by how he said it and it was not long before I knew it directly. And experience it whenever I even say the word "oryoki".

The word "oryoki" is interesting. "O" means "honourable" or to be "considered with respect". "Ryo" means "quantity" and "ki" means "bowls". So the word means "the sacred holds-enough bowls." What is in the bowls, as with every meal, makes your life possible. But the forms of oryoki show you endless possibilities of opening.

Oryoki is not an informal practice in that it is not a more casual form of practice. It is eating while practising zazen, in the same way that the movements of establishing the posture of zazen and clarifying the them in each moment by practicing whole bodily while sitting are part of the practice of zazen. It is not "informal practice", by which I mean that it is not just one of the ways we attempt to integrate our practice outside of zazen. It might be compared to chanoyu, or the Japanese tea ceremony in that chanoyu derived from oryoki and conducting oneself while having chasen or tea with a Zen Master. The tea ceremony and other such practices originated with lay students observing monks doing oryoki but standing outside of it and observing and so because of this the tea service is much more concerned with appearances, with how it looks and how one is seen, than it is with the actual practice of opening to Openness.

The forms of our practice - how we sit, how we stand, the posture of zazen, kinhin, bowing, chanting, and oryoki practice are all based on the deportment of the Buddha and the Awakened Ancestors. They have been adapted and have evolved over the centuries as the circumstances in which practitioners found themselves changed, but they have never lost their purpose, which is to show us how our attention is and make it possible for us to recognize contracted states of attention and release them. When we open the bowls, we open to how we are and can manifest who we are.

The first monastics who practiced with the Buddha in India did not do oryoki practice as we know it today. They each had one bowl, went on begging rounds once a day, and were completely dependant on the generosity of lay people to fill them.

In a teisho entitled "The Work of the Way" from the "Turning the Wheel" series of teisho, Zen Master Anzan Hoshin says,

*When the Dharma was transmitted across the deserts and mountains and seas to China by monks doing the work of the Way, everything was quite different. The climate was different, the economies of the*

*culture were different, the landscape was different, and the language was different. One of the basic characteristics of Chinese culture is its practicality. And so the robes changed, the monastic procedures changed, and even some of the ways of speaking of the Dharma changed. At first, Indian and Chinese monks tried to observe the rule not to eat after midday. But the days were long and the nights were cold and they were hungry and falling ill. So in the evenings, instead of eating some rice, some soup, and some pickles they heated up stones, wrapped them in cloth, and held them over their stomachs to cure the ache. These stones were called "medicine stones." Of course, the stones did little to cure the ache and so soon the Chinese simply ate some rice, soup, and pickles which is the origin of the Japanese term "yakuseki" for evening oryoki meals. I'm not sure how long it took them to substitute three smaller bowls for the single large Indian-styled bowl and to use hashi instead of their fingers. Probably not very long. The Chinese like to eat but I don't think they would have been too impressed with words of wisdom spoken by somebody with mashed rice, soup, and pickles all over their fingers.*

When we engage in intensive practice, we are opening to the spaciousness of experiencing: a vast space of sensations, colours, forms, and sounds. Each sensation, each colour, each form, each sound, is completely empty of any of our thoughts or feelings about it. Openness is so open that it does not need us to mediate or clutter it up with our thoughts or feelings about it.

The bowls you will be holding in your hands are also this emptiness. But this can only be experienced if we open attention past the usual reference points of association. We will not just be "having dinner together". How we handle our bowls and utensils, each detail of the forms of oryoki are points of mindfulness, each point pointing to the emptiness and vastness of all things.

When we are practicing oryoki, we are not only feeding the bodymind the nutrients needed to sustain our practice, we are also directly feeding our practice by opening to the vast expanse of Awakened Awareness which we all hunger for whether we know it or not.

So now I will explain how this introduction to oryoki practice will be structured.

We are going to sit until 11:30. There will be daisan or interviews, no verbal instruction on oryoki. Just sitting.

At 11:30, we will all proceed to the Zendo, where you will observe as monastics do oryoki for their lunch meal. There will be no discussion during this time as the best way for you to get a sense of what this practice is and how it is done is to simply observe it in progress. Also, Roshi has said he doesn't want you to find yourself drowning in the midst of trying to flail through it with a majority of other people also flailing. Instead, you can just watch. But keep your vision open, see the whole activity instead of focusing on little details. We will be demonstrating what is called "formal service" for you and so there are two monks who will serve the food.

Following this, at around 12:00, Dharma Assembly participants will have lunch in the Dining Hall and you will be given three bowls. Chunen angya and Mishin godo will give you instruction in holding your bowls, using the hashi and spoon, and other basic forms that you will need instruction in.

Following lunch, there will be time to do the dishes and have a free period, but we will resume again at 2:00 instead of 3:00. From 2:00 until 5:30 you will meet with myself and the three practice advisors in groups for

instruction in opening, laying out and closing oryoki sets.

At 5:30, for yakuseki or supper, we will all do oryoki practice in the Zendo and two of the monastics will serve the food.

The evening sitting will begin at 7:30 and there will be daisan and practice interviews for participants.

This Dharma Assembly will give all of you enough instruction that you can participate in scheduled oryoki practice in future. To give you an idea of how this might take place I will mention a possibility now: On Saturday mornings, those who have received oryoki instruction can attend the 6:00 a.m. sitting and then stay for oryoki breakfast, which would be served in the Zendo following the associate sitting. Ongoing oryoki instruction might replace the Daruma-kata classes now scheduled since the kata are practiced every morning following formal sittings. Other opportunities will present themselves and as the Sangha grows, scheduled oryoki meals will take place more and more often.

So now I will stop talking and we will all sit.