

Making Offerings to Buddha

By Kokyo Henkel

Devotion is to give oneself completely, and one way to practice devotion is to make offerings to buddha. In Sanskrit this is called *puja*, in Japanese *kuyo*. Shunryu Suzuki Roshi once told a story about offerings. As a young priest in Japan, he would regularly visit a British woman named Miss Ransom, learning English from her and teaching her some Japanese while they had tea. Someone had given her a carved wooden buddha statue which she put on the tokonoma in the apartment where she was living. A tokonoma is a low altar-like shelf, a place to hang a scroll or put some flowers, but since it was low and by the door she thought it would also make a convenient shoe rack. So when Miss Ransom came in to her apartment, she put her dirty shoes on the shelf next to the buddha, and young Shunryu Suzuki felt uncomfortable seeing this. After many days of visiting Miss Ransom and seeing her shoes next to the buddha, one day Shunryu took his cup of tea and respectfully offered it to the buddha on the shelf there, without saying anything. He started doing this on all his visits, and as it became more of a regular practice she began to tease him about idol worship and how silly it is to relate to a wooden statue in this way. Miss Ransom's friends even started leaving burnt matches on the shelf there and using the incense bowl as an ash tray for cigarette butts. But at some point Miss Ransom became curious about Shunryu's devotion and she asked him about the meaning of his strange activity.

Finally Shunryu was able to explain why he was making offerings to a wooden image of buddha and what buddha really is. He told her about the three bodies of buddha: dharmakaya, sambhogakaya, and nirmanakaya. I don't know what he said about them, but I would say that all three bodies are our own true nature, already complete but temporarily obscured by our dualistic thoughts and emotions. The dharmakaya or reality body of buddha is the boundless space-like nature of our awareness, this ever-present awareness that we're usually not paying attention to because attention is so directed toward objects. Huineng, the Sixth Ancestor of Chinese Zen, said, "What is the pure dharmakaya? Everyone's true nature is originally pure, and the ten-thousand things are present within this nature." The sambhogakaya or bliss body of buddha is the cognitive aspect of our awareness. Awareness is not just empty space, it also has a knowing quality that experiences life. The Sixth Ancestor said, "What is the perfect sambhogakaya? As one lamp can instantly dispel a thousand years of darkness, one moment of wisdom eliminates ten-thousand years of ignorance." The nirmanakaya or transformation body of buddha is this boundless awareness with knowing cognition taking form as beneficial activity, the appearance of a sentient being like you and me, manifest in this world in a particular time and place, out of compassion for beings. The historical buddha, Shakyamuni Buddha, is considered a nirmanakaya. The Sixth Ancestor said, "What is the myriad-fold nirmanakaya? If no thought arises your nature is merely empty, but if a thought arises there is transformation."

If the dharmakaya is like boundless space, the sambhogakaya is like radiant sunlight filling the boundless space, and nirmanakaya is like this sunlight reflected on the water, where each wave creates a momentary sparkle for all to see. If we just look at sunlight filling space it doesn't look like anything particular, it's just bright and clear; but when the sunlight touches the water we can see the light sparkle for a moment. That impermanent manifestation of sparkling wave is like each thought and the world that appears to us, where buddhas can benefit beings in conventional ways because they can think and meet others and speak with them. Formless, shapeless,

ungraspable awareness is taking form every moment as some manifestation, so we can't actually separate these three bodies of buddha. Emptiness itself is form and form itself is emptiness.

Somehow young Shunryu Suzuki spoke about these three buddha bodies to Miss Ransom, and said, “You think buddha is this wooden image, but it's actually these three bodies of buddha.” According to Suzuki Roshi, “She was rather amazed. She didn't know Buddhism was so profound, and she started to become interested in it... After a year I think she had a pretty good understanding of Buddhism and one day she took me downtown to buy some incense and she started to offer it.” I appreciate this story because Shunryu didn't set out to teach Miss Ransom about Buddha-Dharma; she was inspired to learn through seeing someone making offerings to a buddha image.

So when we make offerings to a buddha image we can understand that we are offering them to these three bodies of buddha. Since the boundless knowing compassionate awareness that all beings share – the three bodies of buddha – is what makes liberation from suffering possible, for ourselves and everyone, what could be more worthy of our devoted offerings? We can even understand the carved wooden image as a manifestation body of buddha. The image is not a sentient being like many nirmanakaya buddhas, but buddha can take any form in order to help people. If a carved wooden image could help people open up just a little bit to buddha's wisdom and compassion, then buddha could manifest in this way, with the help of a wood carver. How these things happen is very mysterious – does the wood carver know that she's producing a nirmanakaya buddha? That may be her intention but maybe not. Due to the awesome and inconceivable power of buddha, the reality body can manifest in any way.

Therefore we offer incense, flowers, light, water, food, chanting, and prostrations to buddha with this understanding. Our offerings need not be material things; we can imagine offering any experience we enjoy to Buddha. We might doubt the validity of such a thing since it is just imagination, but buddha's teaching is that there actually is no real incense or flowers anyway, that everything we experience is our imagination, just a manifestation of awareness. Because we have physically manifested bodies, it helps to do physically manifest practices and offer physically manifest flowers and incense, to align body and mind – but if we're stuck in a place where we can't offer physical flowers, like during zazen, we can always imagine offering anything, and since we're using our imagination, we might as well imagine billions of beautiful flowers.

Dogen Zenji has a fascicle in the Treasury of the True Dharma Eye called *Kuyo Shobutsu*, or “Making Offerings to All Buddhas” where he says, “You become buddha by the merit of making offerings to buddhas. How can a sentient being who has not made offerings to even one buddha, become a buddha?” Dogen goes on to say, “Making offerings to buddhas does not mean providing buddhas with what they need. It's dedicating moment after moment of our life to buddhas without wasting a moment. What use can buddhas make of gold and silver, even if they are offered? What benefit can buddhas receive if incense and flowers are offered? However, buddhas receive the offerings with great compassion to help increase the merit of sentient beings.”

If buddha is boundless awareness that's present here and now for each of us, the totality of everything in the universe, all-inclusive timeless presence of all beings, we might ask why we would want to make offerings to that buddha? It's just because we think there are all these things that don't already belong to buddha. If buddha is the totality of everything then already everything's given to buddha, but we often forget that. We think that we have some thing that's actually not buddha's, it's "mine" and you have that thing which is not buddha's that's "yours." This is just our normal deluded human way of thinking. So to bring our minds back to the reality that everything is already buddha's, we can practice making offerings to buddhas.

Usually we think of offering outer things in the world outside of us, such as candlelight, incense, and flowers, but we can also make inner offerings of our own body and mind. Actually outer offerings are mentally created images arising from our own body and mind too, so in reality they are also inner offerings, but we can understand inner offerings more easily when we offer our five physical senses and five aggregates of body and mind. We can make this kind of offering to buddha during zazen or at any time, such as walking down the street. We could start with the eyes, our own eyes, offering them to all buddhas throughout space and time. Sincerely offer them, feeling, "I give them to you, buddha, do what you will with them." For them to be received, that means buddha has to actually inhabit them. We might think that buddhas would say, "No, I don't want your eyes" but they're too compassionate to do that; they always want to receive our offerings. For the buddhas to receive our eyes, they have to come in and inhabit our eyes and then buddha is looking through our eyes. If buddha is the boundless totality of everything, if we give our eyes to that, then the totality of everything starts seeing through our eyes. Then I, as an individual person, am not really in control anymore of what I'm seeing. Buddha gets to decide, it's kind of like giving our personal power over to buddha. So we can walk down the street and see beautiful trees and flowers and we can offer those beautiful trees and flowers as outer offerings, and also these eyes that are enjoying the trees, we can give them to buddha too.

And we can give these ears to Buddha, letting buddha now inhabit our ears, so now buddha can hear through these ears. We can give this nose, tongue, and body sensations to buddha. Since we generally want to offer the best to buddha, to make the most wholehearted gift, we might relax first and feel the ease of a relaxed body and then offer that. However, one nice thing about buddhas is that they don't discriminate between a tense body and relaxed body, so they compassionately receive and inhabit them equally. Since we especially want to offer anything that we're holding onto, if we're holding onto a tense body, we can give that to buddha. If we might be holding onto a really relaxed body, we can give that to buddha.

That's how to offer the five physical senses, and then there are the five aggregates that make up what we call a person: Form is those five physical senses, so we've already covered that. The next aggregate is feelings. We can offer feelings to buddha, and especially pleasurable feelings. It may be quite hard to do this, to remember in the midst of pleasure, instead of just enjoying it oneself, to offer it to buddha. Also, unpleasant feelings in this body and mind we can also offer to buddha. Then buddha, the totality of everything, can inhabit every feeling. The third aggregate after form and feelings is perceptions or conceptions. We can offer the way we label things, name things, and think things – offer all our thoughts to buddha, both good and bad ones. But since I appreciate buddha so much, if I'm doing that practice of offering my presently arising

thought to buddha, I might try to transform the thought a little bit to offer a so-called better one. The fourth aggregate is karmic formations: all our karmic tendencies, all our habitual patterns, we can offer these to buddha. And then the fifth aggregate is dualistic consciousness, the way it seems like there's a mind over here perceiving objects over there. Even though it's just our ordinary way of being in the world, consciousness is always unsatisfactory since it seems to be divided, split in two. Buddha is not split in two, buddha is undivided, all-inclusive awareness. So we can offer this dualistic consciousness to nondual awareness, giving ourselves away completely.

Suzuki Roshi once said, “To make the big ring around the moon an offering to Buddha is *kuyo*, or *puja*. To hear the sound of the river should be an offering according to Dogen Zenji. To have deeper understanding instead of shallow substantial understanding is to make a perfect offering.” In this spirit, Dogen once quoted his teacher Rujing who said, “During the time of sitting zazen, patched-robe monks are making offerings to all the buddhas and Zen ancestors in the whole universe. Everyone without exception pays homage and makes boundless offerings of flowers, lamps, precious jewels, and fine robes. Do you know this is happening? If you know it, you cannot say you're wasting time. If you don't yet know it, do not avoid what is directly in front of you.” Dogen said in response to this, “During the time of sitting zazen, do not say that patched-robe monks polishing a tile to make a mirror, or striking the cart instead of the ox to make the cart move, is making offerings of flowers, lamps, jewels, and robes to buddhas and Zen ancestors in the whole universe.”

These are Zen metaphors for trying to do something conditioned to realize the unconditioned. Trying to make a future buddha by sitting in a certain posture is like trying make a mirror by polishing a rough roof tile. Trying to get an ox-cart to move by striking the cart is like trying to make progress by arranging the body perfectly instead of directly recognizing what is already the case. In other words, to think that we're doing some activity as an offering in order to become a buddha in the future is not the practice Dogen is recommending. True zazen is already buddha offering everything to buddha.