

Some Thoughts on Bowing

by Kokyo Henkel

Bowing is an ancient practice which began long before Shakyamuni Buddha's time in India, and is still done all around the world in different spiritual traditions. Bowing may be the most natural bodily form for expressing humbleness, gratitude, respect, and awe. All major religions have some form of prostration or bowing. I once attended the ordination of a Catholic monk, and the most moving part of the ceremony for me was watching the ordinand lying face-down on the stone floor, with arms spread out in the form of a cross. Someone then lifted up the ordinand's hood to cover his head, as if he'd died. This prostration was a beautiful expression of letting the illusion of separate self die into the boundless unity of God. Judaism currently does not have the practice of prostrations, but apparently in the Middle Ages it was a common practice. Islam has a well-known form of prostration, dropping the body to the floor before Allah five times a day. Hinduism, Taoism, and Shinto also have the practice of prostrations, bowing to the ground before various representations of the Divine. Since bowing is such a natural and complete expression of devotion, it's no wonder that all religions practice some form of this simple gesture.

During the time of Shakyamuni Buddha, when a person heard the Buddha's teachings, awakening to their liberating power, he or she would often prostrate to the Buddha with deep appreciation. Since that time, in every tradition of Buddha-Dharma throughout the world, there is the practice of placing the palms together, symbolically joining together all dualistic ideas of self and other by making two separate hands into one—and then bending over and dropping to the floor in full prostrations. In the Zen tradition, we bow down in a five-point prostration: two knees, two elbows, and forehead, all our different extremities touching the one ground. With hands on the floor, we turn the palms upward and lift them as an added gesture of respect, receiving buddha's "feet" in our hands. It is a whole body practice, which can also be done while reciting a verse with each prostration. In this way prostrations can unify body, speech, and mind in one complete activity.

What are we actually bowing to? To Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, the three treasures. That's why we often do three bows. "Buddha" does not simply mean our founding teacher Shakyamuni Buddha, a particular person who lived in ancient India, and "Dharma" and "Sangha" are not just his particular teachings and the community that practiced with him. That is one partial meaning, but a wider meaning of bowing to the three treasures is expressed by the ancient Indian Bodhisattva Asanga, who said: "I bow down to Buddha, the beginningless, centerless, and infinite, to perfect peace, fully self-awakened, which when purified shows the fearless unchanging path that brings realization." As for Dharma, Asanga said: "I bow down to the radiant sun of Dharma... to the ungraspable beyond all descriptions, self-aware peace, pure luminous nondual knowing which completely ends grasping, aversion, and confusion towards mental objects." And for Sangha, Asanga said: "I bow down to Sangha, those whose mind is no longer obscured, those who have realized nondual knowing, awareness of the purity of all beings, the true nature of mind, lucid clarity, seeing obscurations as without essence." I bow down with deep gratitude and respect to these three treasures! Bowing with a devoted heart helps me open to Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha and vow to align my life with them, again and again.

Various practices are taught as antidotes for different obscurations that seem to hide our true nature, different negative emotions that we want to loosen up, unravel and let go of. Making offerings of incense, light and flowers is an antidote for stinginess or greed. Rejoicing in the goodness of others is an antidote for jealousy. Doing prostrations is an antidote for pride. Even if one has never heard anything about the meaning of bowing, the basic physical action of lowering ourselves in this way naturally evokes a sense of humility, expressing reverence and respect. Surrendering oneself in prostration is one of the best practices for letting go of arrogance, conceit, and pride; to lower ourselves before anyone or anything could be helpful, but it is especially so when bowing to the three treasures which are themselves free from conceit. Sometimes we might experience resistance to bowing, especially if we have a lot of pride. Pride is being a little too attached to the illusion of independent self, a self that is “better” than other selves. Doing prostrations is surrendering this individual body, speech, and mind “to the beginningless, centerless, and infinite, to perfect peace.” What is the illusion of independent self that we tend to carry around all day long? It is simply the unexamined assumption and feeling that beginningless, centerless, and infinite awareness does not pervade all experiences equally, but only pervades the limited part of experience we call “this body and mind.” The false assumption, feeling, and thought that “I am this body but I am not that statue on the altar,” for example, can be surrendered by physically bowing, again and again.

The Chinese Zen Teacher Huangbo always taught the practice of not seeking anything. One day in the Buddha Hall, he was doing three prostrations to the Buddha on the altar. A novice monk, who would later become the Emperor of China, asked, “If we are not to seek anything from Buddha, Dharma, Sangha, what are you seeking by bowing like that?” Huangbo answered, “Though I am not seeking anything from Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, it is my practice to express respect in this way.” The novice asked, “But what purpose does it serve?” Huangbo then slapped the novice, who said, “How coarse you are!” Huangbo replied, “Are you making a distinction between refined and coarse?” and slapped him again. For Huangbo, bowing is done just as a respectful expression, not to seek anything. In Zen, ultimately, there is no purpose of any practice other than just expression itself, but this non-seeking practice can be done with one's whole body and heart.

The Chinese Zen ancestor Rujing taught his student Dogen a verse to recite when doing prostrations: “Bower and bowed-to are naturally empty and still; the bodies of self and other are essentially non-dual. Mystical communion is inconceivable.” This communion, or sympathetic resonance between bower and bowed-to, is truly ungraspable. If, as the verse says, bower and bowed-to are empty in nature, with no separation between them, who is bowing to whom? Dogen, in his poem called “Prostration” (*Raihai*) wrote: “A white heron, on a snowy white field, where winter grass is unseen, hides itself in its own figure.” Where can we find the separation or difference between the heron and the field? In the midst of a wholehearted bow, the ten-thousand grasses and myriad distinctions are lost beneath the all-pervading whiteness. Prostrations can open us to the reality where this body and mind, the limited experiences of sensation and thought, are indistinguishable from the totality and ungraspability of limitless experiencing we call “buddha.” How could one ever do such an exalted and sublime prostration as that? Just do it! Let the body and mind fall, not just physically but also emotionally, dropping, surrendering, again and again.

Bowing to an “other,” perceiving someone or something as separate from ourselves, is not the authentic bowing of Zen. And, ironically, if we are resisting bowing because it feels too dualistic, this is actually a form of reifying the other, attributing reality to the illusion of duality. Resistance reifies self-and-other as separate. The Zen ancestors who created images to bow to did not intend to set them up as something other than themselves. However, it may look like someone is bowing to something, because we have a strong habit of seeing the world in that way.

Suzuki Roshi, in “Zen Mind Beginner’s Mind,” has a chapter on bowing. When his American students inquired why they need to bow at all, he suggested the practice of bowing nine times at the beginning of morning service instead of the traditional custom of three bows. Suzuki Roshi said, “By bowing we are giving up ourselves. To give up ourselves means to give up our dualistic ideas. So there is no difference between zazen practice and bowing. Usually to bow means to pay our respects to something that is more worthy of respect than ourselves. But when you bow to Buddha you should have no idea of Buddha, you just become one with Buddha, you are already Buddha himself. When you become one with Buddha, one with everything that exists, you find the true meaning of being. When you forget all your dualistic ideas, everything becomes your teacher, and everything can be the object of worship.” We may assume that bowing is to pay respect to something great, that is more worthy of respect than our limited little human body and mind—surrendering our confused self-centered “small mind” before nondual awareness, “big mind,” the buddha-nature of all beings. That conventional understanding may be helpful, but ultimately we can bow without any idea of small or big, just being one with buddha, “the beginningless, centerless, and infinite.” Suzuki Roshi continues, “When everything exists within your big mind, all dualistic relationships drop away. There is no distinction between heaven and earth, man and woman, teacher and disciple... Then Buddha bows to Buddha, and you bow to yourself. This is the true bow.”

A few last words from Dogen Zenji, in his essay called “Dharani” (*dharani* is a support to gather or focus the mind, which for Dogen means teachers and students bowing together): “When bowing remains in the world, Buddha-Dharma remains; when bowing disappears, Buddha-Dharma disappears.” What a strong statement! Couldn’t we just practice zazen, without bowing? If so, our Zen founder says, the teaching and practice of awakening would disappear from this world.