

BOWING

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The Place of Peace Dharma House

This is an assorted collection of reflections on the spirit and essence of Bowing.

The scriptures tell us that when there is no more bowing there will be no more Buddhism. That statement makes plain how significant the heart and spirit of bowing is. Bowing may begin with a physical gesture but it certainly does not end there. Whilst we have life in us the meaning of bowing never ends; as dye permeates cloth so it fans out and changes, or reclaims, every part of us. We soon come to see that bowing continues even when there is no physical movement. And still it is good to make that movement.

When given meditation instruction the first thing we are shown is how to bow. We bow when we enter the meditation hall, bow to our seat then turn and bow to the room before sitting down to meditate.

BOWING: as we enter the room in which we sit.

The physical meditation hall is an external expression of the womb of the Tathagata, the hara, our internal sitting place. It is with us wherever we go. There is never a time (whether we know it or not) when we are not sitting within it. Bowing acknowledges the preciousness of this place and it expresses our wish to knowingly enter it fully, in body speech and mind.

BOWING: to our sitting place.

We offer ourselves. The place where we sit is nowhere other than within this body and this mind. The human realm is our training ground and the life we have is the specific set of circumstances that we have been given to work with. Bowing says please help me, please teach me, I am here and I am willing to look at anything, address anything and to be changed by this practice in any way that is good and in harmony with universal Truth. Bowing says, what is asked of me? How do I fulfil the potential of this life? It also expresses a total and unreserved giving of ourselves, we entrust ourselves to that which flows, we come as one who wishes to see clearly, to be taught by and to serve the Master in the Heart. It says 'I am here to listen'. It says, 'I am yours.'

BOWING: outwards to the room.

Only we can move our own feet, only we can resolve our karma and this is done within the context of living and training with others. We recognise the true wish of all who are present and show gratitude that there are others of like mind with whom we can practice. Our bow acknowledges that this world is a giant melting pot of karma where cause and effect is working itself out in endlessly different ways. Also acknowledged is that it is through our daily interchanges with others that things we find difficult to look at may arise, and our bow says we are willing to train with and be taught by those circumstances; more than that, we actually *ask* life to teach us.

We are also bowing to the room, the place that gives us shelter whilst we meditate. Bricks and mortar, carpet and furniture are Buddha Nature too and a building can 'know' that it is being used as a place of retreat; that it responds with generosity of spirit is deeply touching. This bow helps us to take nothing for granted and to sense how all things sit with us and will help us along the way.

We then turn to face the wall and sit.

FULL BOWS: As done at Morning Service.

This is when we kneel and touch our foreheads to the ground then, with flat (not half closed) open palms, facing upwards, we lift our hands above our heads. As a postulant I was told that we are raising the Buddha's feet above our heads, an image that has stayed with me. We put the Truth above thoughts feelings and emotions, we put the heart (the living Dharma) above the head (conditioned thought processes). We are saying I will value the clarity of true insight (the light that separates the murky from the pure)¹ above intellectual pondering and emotional reactions that come from, and entangle me more deeply in, painful confusion. This bow says, 'I will seek for the Truth in all that I do.'

Buddhism is the path of awakening and, with this bow, we express our wish to fulfil that potential, and our willingness to do the work of training that will enable this to happen. When we are going to act in harmful ways, our feelings can be very strong. If we bow to them there is a relaxed inner strength rather than tension. I see you (the arising of confusion), I acknowledge you and I respectfully decline to act upon you. There is no fight. We tame rather than suppress, face rather than avoid, transform rather than destroy our stubborn karma and old mental habit patterns. As Shakyamuni said, "Oh house builder of the house of ego, thou art seen and thou shalt build no more". With this bow we 'hold up' (or offer) all that remains unconverted within us, that it may encounter the light of Truth so that we may see clearly how to help ourselves.

At Jukai we are asked, “Is it your wish to be a Buddhist?” the ordinand replies, “It is”. With these bows, and with every bow, we are reaffirming that wish each day.

It is a literal Truth that when there is no more bowing there is no more Buddhism. In bowing we ask to have our eyes opened and this unrestricted giving and opening up of oneself to the Master in the Heart is the seeking of the way forward and an acknowledgement of the source of the teaching. This can also be described as taking Refuge in Buddha (meditation). It invites and enables the calling forth, the path of awakening, to open up. When we ask for help, and offer ourselves to be taught, what flows back to us, with such tenderness and generosity of spirit, is guidance and insight in how to live our life, how to respond to what life brings, how to awaken.

From Refuge in Buddha, the source of enlightened insight, comes the activity of meditation within the everyday thoughts speech and actions of one who is training themselves in the path of awakening. Bowing in daily life can be described as ‘Buddha recognises Buddha and Buddha bows to Buddha’ in ordinary daily interchanges. We bow to the formless stream of meditation and the spirit and essence of that bowing is then shown within how we live our life. Thus our transient human body becomes the embodiment of the ‘always becoming Buddha’ as each of us seeks to serve the other (animate or inanimate) and make all a success, each in their own way.

Bowing unites body and mind, self and other, form and formless, in a very deep way that is “far beyond all common consciousness, beyond all thinking”.² When someone puts their hands together and, with sincerity and humility, bows, they are returning body and mind unto the source of all existence. This may not be immediately obvious but it is true. What begins as a ceremonial form or as temple etiquette fans out into every aspect of our lives. Rather than being something we ‘do’, bowing becomes what we are and opens up a vista of opportunities that enable training to deepen and a life to be transformed, as our individual life becomes all life. For this to be possible we need to be open to the ever flowing incoming Buddha. When everything has been stripped away and we stand in that Great Unknown, there is only the Master in the Heart, the Source of existence, the Truth endlessly manifesting; the living flow that we call meditation. It is to this that we bow. Taking Refuge in IT, in all Its forms, must come first and it must remain so, if we are to fulfil our reason for training.

BOWING: as paying homage.

We pay homage to the Buddha by the way in which we live our life; how we treat and regard all that surrounds us and by the way we in which view ourselves. Trusting the meditation and trusting oneself I have found to be one and the same. The human will, or ability to choose, becomes as a child turning to its parent. That turning within (which is also a form of bowing) brings about a meeting in the heart and from that meeting love (or great purity, Truth...I do not know the word) comes forth. Recognising and becoming the living expression of that Truth is to take Refuge in the Dharma. Through this we unselfconsciously, naturally, become Dharma, as our everyday thoughts speech and actions pay homage to the Buddha. Surely this has to be the purpose of the human Sangha in our world.

RESISTANCE TO BOWING:

Perhaps you resent being asked to bow at a meditation event because you cannot understand why you should do it. Maybe it feels like a strange unfamiliar action, something that is done in the East but which appears to have little relevance in our day and age.

If bowing seems like an alien gesture that makes you feel uncomfortable, yet you still want to practice Buddhism, you may find it helpful to try it at home, when you are on your own and unobserved. In a quiet room, with no distractions, put your whole being into the bow, really give yourself to it and see what arises in your mind; can you understand why you do not want to bow? Within the resistance to bowing lies the next step in your training, which is being highlighted by those uncomfortable or resentful feelings. If you can be open to, and train with them, they will offer you a valuable insight into how you can help yourself in a wise and meaningful way.

Bowing will always make some of us feel uncomfortable or resentful because, like all forms of ceremonial, it calls forth the koan (the area of inner confusion and pain that we cannot understand and which still influences our actions). We do not always appreciate being reminded of our unresolved issues and can resent being disturbed by the Truth of what lies within us, but if we are able to welcome that disturbance, then we find we can learn much from it that will improve the quality of our life.

Perhaps your exploratory bow will reveal an inner connection to a deeper awareness that had previously evaded you and bowing will begin to make sense. Even if it does not, even if you still resent bowing, you are faced with an

opportunity in the form of a feeling and a choice. Training is not based upon the transient world of like and dislike; I feel like doing it so I will, I don't feel like doing it so I won't. This way of thinking anchors us to, and continues, the world of suffering. Training is based upon something deeper than feelings. It is based upon the call in our hearts to come forth and receive the gift of Truth, and the Serene Reflection practice is there to help us find that inner freedom and joy.

Sooner or later we see that bowing is an entering into; it is not an act of subjugation. With each bow we recognise our own potential. It is an offering, an opening up, of ourselves that makes possible a receiving of Dharma, of teaching. It expresses a willingness to be changed by the power of Truth that leads us to freedom, the freedom of not being bound by inaccurate perception and confused thinking.

This freedom can also be called humility. Humility here means purity, it comes from knowing what we are and living from that inherent completeness, which can also be called our original purity. What prevents us from living from that pure place? The training will help us to understand and resolve those issues and this cannot be done without bowing.

What began as being hard-going gradually becomes our natural way of being; it is what we want to do. Bowing is a voluntary act, an act of devotion, of offering, done for no practical purpose other than the giving and opening up of ourselves, which is what makes it so precious and so bountiful.

It is understandable that some who are new to practice may think that bowing and the respectful behaviour that flows from it are repressive or that people are being asked to behave in a submissive manner, but this is not so. Bowing is the very essence of spiritual adulthood, adequacy and inner freedom. Just as we cannot have self-centred activity and enlightened action at the same time so one cannot be a spiritual adult unless one can bow and appreciate the spirit of bowing, in all its forms; there is never a time when this is not so. Bowing is not there to repress us but to make clear the great way of the Buddha's and Ancestors.

A PITFALL: trying to fill a need.

Maybe you want to be the one who is bowed to. This is as much of a problem area as not wanting to bow. Needing to be important, the one who is in charge, in control and who is respected. If we look into this then, like any area of confusion, it contains insights that will help to resolve inner distress. My experience has been that we grasp at self-identification and the need for recognition for a reason and there is usually much grief and fear behind it. Whilst we need recognition of our worth, we are still suffering and remain

vulnerable; this is because we doubt our inherent worth, our completeness. When we bow to our unresolved painful issues, by returning them unto the heart of stillness, what flows back to us is a response that is filled with tenderness and love, a love that melts the fear and sense of aloneness that gave birth to that confusion. Bowing turns the gaze gently within and we see how behaviour (desire for respect) that once filled a need within us, a need fuelled by unresolved sorrow, has become as a thief in the night that robs us of knowing that inner purity.³

Whilst we act upon desire for praise, fear of criticism or wanting to get something for ourselves, our actions are not pure and the physical fabric of our bodies is distressed because we are looking in the wrong direction, trying to satisfy an inner need by external means. Bowing (in the form of offering our thought processes) helps us to free ourselves from choices that cause us distress by highlighting them.

By 'not pure' I mean that we are still governed by inner confusion. Bowing to our suffering (in whatever form it takes) enables it to open up and reveal its secrets. Bowing, standing up straight and humility are one and the same. The heart of bowing (please teach me, please help me with this) receives those insights and from them comes a clarity of understanding that dissolves the clouds of doubt and fear that have saddened us for so long, revealing the vastness and freedom that was always there, waiting for us to be able to see it.

BOWING IS NOT RESTRICTED TO ANY ONE FORM:

GIVING: Bowing is giving and receiving at the same time; it is one action with two aspects.

We give our life back to its source so that we can fulfil our purpose on this planet. We give by being willing to undergo the training that will enable us to be one who can receive what flows towards us from within that deep mystery. We give our bodies and minds so that the incoming Buddha can have form and voice in this world. We give through living a life of faith, through our unrestricted willingness to be taught by universal Truth. We give by being willing to resolve our karma, no matter how long it takes or how much it asks of us. We give by never turning away, by keeping training, no matter what happens. We give by being willing to blossom, willing to be all that we can be. These are all aspects of bowing.

RECEIVING:

Bowing prepares the mind to receive; when we bow we open (give) ourselves to

the great mystery of life, and as our offering flows out, so much flows in. As we inhale oxygen that maintains our physical life so a quality of being enters into us on the spiritual breath. In recent years I have come to see how important the aspect of receiving is. Everything we need is there within us from the start; some of it confuses us, some frightens us, some things remain hidden and unknown to us for many years. We have no more Buddha Nature after three decades of training than we did on day one, what changes is our ability to sit still and receive the Truth of what it is we are; to receive the unfolding of karma and the unfolding of the Buddha's teaching, knowing that both are Dharma; allowing whatever may need to reveal itself to enter our mind and welcoming it, is a form of bowing.

THE SILENT PARTNER: “form is only pure, pure is all form.”⁴

We should not forget our flesh and blood body in all of this. If mind is the forerunner of all activity then the physical body is its silent partner. The scriptures say that we must make the teaching our blood bones and marrow. I used to think that this meant we had to really, really understand things, now I know that there is more to it. When the spirit of bowing permeates our life, spirit and matter merge as one. This enables our ordinary human body and mind to undergo a spiritual change or transformation. The body is limited by a certain lifespan, it needs food and water and will die if conditions are too hot or too cold. The eternal vastness of meditation, which is the true essence of both our body and mind, is not dependent upon anything, which is why it is the Refuge. Buddhism shows us how to accept our ordinary humanity, with its attendant limitations (another aspect of bowing). When we bow to the Truth the Truth enters into us and the silent partner is no longer restricted by any limitation. Our physical form will still age and die, we can still get a headache or feel tired, but rather than being a restriction or limitation it becomes part of existence, time, flow.⁵

Understanding that the human form we now have is transient and ever changing inspires us to use our time well by not losing sight of ‘the important thing’. Through many years of dedicated training the space our physical form occupies becomes the Pure Land as our inner organs, and the cells of our body, are freed from the confusion that saddened and weighed them down, and obscured their natural purity. Thus we pay homage by remaining true to our wish and our body fulfils its purpose by becoming the vessel within which conversion and blossoming takes place. It is no longer a karmic body but a body of Truth, of transformation. Through it we are able “to cherish the longing deep”⁶ within us; we are able to love and care for this precious being we are, on every level of existence.

BOWING THROUGH CONTEMPLATION: ⁷

Doing nothing, in the right way, is to do a great deal.⁸ It is the purest form of contemplation and is an aspect of bowing which offers body and mind in a total, unrestricted way with no thought of personal gain. The physical act of bowing lasts for a few seconds, the heart and life of bowing are ever increasing. With the physical bow we return body and mind unto the source of all existence, and this is exactly what we do when we contemplate. In contemplation all the transient, impermanent aspects of our individuality (preferences, personality, gender, opinions) fade within our original purity as we entrust ourselves to that inner abiding, for no reason other than that we want to, because it is the most natural of activities; it is where we belong.

BOWING: beginners mind.

It is said that the trainee should keep beginners mind (sometimes expressed as our initial humility) to the end. When we came to training we knew we needed help, as time goes on that knowing increases and it becomes easier and easier to not fill that space with our own thoughts and opinions. Nothing we create or imagine can ever match what meditation brings, it just gets in the way. Bowing helps us to not get stuck with what we think we know. The highest Precept is always the Dharma of this moment and bowing keeps us open and fully receptive to that inflowing teaching. It tunes our ability to hear the more subtle promptings and increases our trust in all that meditation offers.

EXTRACTS FROM A PERSONAL JOURNAL: The tender human aspect of bowing.

Bowing through and as the daily activities of a contemplative life:

When I first came to The Place of Peace my one thought was to take Refuge, to live from the refuge at all times, that everything I do would be done in the same way from the same source. Only the externals would change. I would (still do) regularly contemplate, giving myself to that abiding. This may be done walking by the sea, or relaxing in an armchair. What does life ask of me? Am I responding fully? Asked not in words but by the giving of myself (which is the spirit of bowing) to contemplative reflection. Releasing myself into that vast living stillness, turning to the Master in the Heart. I am yours. A longing to do the work of this lifetime, to make full use of all that has been given, to follow my Master all the way. It opened up a quality of being wherein I sense the true

monk lies. Kind eyes rest upon me and I am as a traveller walking into an unknown...and yet it is known in the depths of my being. I feel that this 'non-being' and the contentment that accompanies it, is the heart of the temple. IT responds to needs, manifests as required by circumstances whilst having no fixed form. Perhaps I would call it the tender, human aspect of bowing. When there is no more bowing there is no more Buddhism. Bowing is the always becoming, and that always becoming is the fruition of life in this moment and this moment and I feel it is the fulfilment of my vows. Reverend Master Jiyu told us to "hold out your faith for others to see." I am filled with deep ease as this great mystery moves through me and this ordinary body and mind gives It form and voice. It is hard to put into words, and all the time I am learning, but I feel it is what I am meant to be doing here. Every day is different, and every day is the same as this tiny new being who I call me bows and listens, asking to be taught.

GIFTS OF GRACE:

There is so much more to Buddhist training than just dealing with suffering. One of the invocations says, "Our birthright to restore". 9 Through bowing we surrender, allowing that which was closed to open up; we empty ourselves out, so that a new and better way of being, of living, can flow in. When bowing permeates to our core, the quality of our breathing changes. A stillness that has lightness and life (the life that is increasing in brilliance) settles within us, infusing our being. This quietens us, and draws us deeper into Its great mystery; we realise how small and temporary we are, how profound and generous is the help we receive. If we do our absolute best the meditation will do the rest. When we are not tampering with our mind, asking...forcing it, to go against its source, it soaks in this new living stillness, this expansiveness of being. We feel our senses merge within a completeness so exquisite that our only thought is to bow in gratitude and service. As life-giving oxygen is carried around our body through the lungs so the spiritual breath of meditation permeates our entirety with the life of the great mystery. It changes us from within. Our commitment, our wish to serve the Truth of existence, deepens, the wish to let go and be absorbed into It fills us. This letting go is a joy, a setting free, an entering into life on a deeper level. At this point it is not a struggle, there is no resistance or uncertainty, just a YES. A giving of oneself that is a leap beyond all that is our consciously known world. The mind we once had becomes as an old coat that no longer fits or as a skin that sheds itself, quietly falling away, graciously knowing that its time is over.

BOWING TO LIFE: comes in many different ways.

Beginning the day with a bow.

If you have no time for morning meditation, if your day is filled with activity yet you take a quiet moment (maybe in the bathroom if privacy is in short supply) to put your hands together, palm to palm, feet firmly set upon the ground, and you say, with reverence and sincerity, “I come for Refuge”, then bow with all your being, you are paying homage to Buddha. You are inviting the path to open up before you, you are entrusting yourself to the Great Mystery, the Master in the Heart, and asking to be taught. Bowing like this is a ceremony and a meditation period rolled into one. A sincere bow can change a person’s life.

STANDING UP STRAIGHT: bowing to error.

When we have done something regrettable, rather than hiding behind excuses or self-judgement, we can ‘stand up straight in the presence of the Buddha’s and Ancestors’, which is another form of bowing, and say, “I did this, I am sorry, what can I learn from it, how can I understand myself more fully and, through that understanding, make my life better?” In standing up straight there will be no judgement. From within the great mystery, there is no condemnation, just helpful insight and an opening up of the way forward.

BOWING IS SEEKING THE WAY FORWARD: enabling life to teach us.

As young monks at Shasta Abbey we were encouraged to take everything that happens to us as being for our own good. At first I found this hard to understand because some things in life had caused me pain and distress. I had felt betrayed by the actions of others. What was good about that? When I cannot understand something, rather than dismiss it as being wrong, I just let it ‘be’, resting within my mind, and come back to it from time to time. How successfully we respond to situations is dependent upon our ability to bow to them. If I allow every situation to teach me then, no matter whether I see something as enjoyable, indifferent or very difficult, the way forward is always presenting itself; I just need to be able to see what life is asking of me in that situation, what opportunity is presenting itself. This is how it is good for me; the Truth is always revealing Itself and so life is always teaching us.

Bowing to a situation, be it internal (as in troubled feelings) or external, enables us to 'enter into it', to see below the surface appearance of circumstances and emotions, and, eventually, to the very root of the matter. This is because we seek the truth. Rather than escape or avoidance we are looking for genuine understanding, and so there is no conflict. All conditions are working towards a common goal. This brings a freedom of inner movement and sense of purpose. Even if it is just ‘sit still with this, be patient’ we know our spiritual journey continues and no matter what feelings may be coursing through us, or how

much work remains to be done, the way forward is wide open.

Sometimes we may feel stuck or that we are going in circles and do not know what to do. Perhaps we are afraid to look within, cannot keep our mind from wandering or just feel lost. Doing sets of three or six full bows two or three times a day, as we can manage, will be invaluable, especially if you feel unable to sit in formal meditation. Through these bows we are actively seeking the way forward, which demonstrates trust, faith and willingness. Bowing steadies us and gives clear direction and reassurance to all the confusion within us as our distress mingles with the ever present light of Truth. By bowing we are placing ourselves within that light. There is something very innocent and noble about saying “I don't know which way is up right now, but I know that if I bow, help will come.” If I continue, patiently, day by day, then the way forward will beckon to me because I am beckoning to it. One calls and one answers. Our bows say, ‘I need help and I am ready to listen’.

When we put our hands together and bow, the bending forward of the torso is a returning, the flowing of all that we are—flesh bones and marrow, thoughts and feelings, karmic history (all the conditions that have gone into making us the being we are)—unto to the great formless mystery of life, to the place from whence it came. When I complete the bow by raising my torso to the standing position, the formless is seen within and as the shape of a human being. Many conditions have come together to create the temporary form and figure we now have. These conditions are constantly changing. Training shows us how to work within the transient nature of a human life so that we can find the Truth of what it is we are, and in finding become that Truth.

How we bow shows our understanding of Buddhism and what it is that we are doing when we train. It is an act of devotion, of love and reverence, of offering all that we are, of recognising what we are; it is the most natural expression of gratitude and respect. Bowing is ceaseless practice. It is a giving and receiving as the truth of meditation enters into us and we enter into that truth. We bow publicly, as part of ceremonial, yet it is always, at heart, a private and intimate act. Through and within the essence of bowing we are constantly renewing our vow to live the Buddhist life. The scriptures say to “kindle light in the blessed country, ever close at hand” 10...that land is the hara, the womb of the Tathagata, wherein the heart of a bow merges with our humanity as Buddha recognises Buddha and there is nothing left to call either self or other.

At night I stand alone before the altar here at The Place of Peace and bow,

quietly, gladly, offering myself to That Which Is; I am yours. There is tenderness to this; it is a beautiful thing to do. The walls of this little meditation hall fall away, as the limited reveals the limitless and the great mystery of life opens up. I feel so small, so new, so blessed. Bowing says thank you, it says 'Yes'. Barriers fall away, differences merge within the eternal heartbeat of IT. I do not know where I am going, just that I am in safe hands, willing and wanting to be called forth. A living stillness settles and infuses my being. This tiny little person knows she is but a novice in this vast and wondrous unknown....and bows.

Notes.

1. *The Scripture of Great Wisdom, The Litany of the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives for the Laity*, (Shasta Abbey Press, 1990) p.73. This Scripture is part of our daily morning service.
2. *The Most Excellent Mirror Samadhi, The Litany of the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives for the Laity*, (Shasta Abbey Press, 1990) p.61. (Also part of our daily morning service.)
3. For some of us, the need for recognition of our worth from our fellow humans will be one of the steps along the way. This is not a fault any more than it is a place to stay. It is part of what makes the 'going on' possible and I would like to say more about this in a future article.
4. From *The Scripture of Great Wisdom, The Litany of the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives for the Laity*, (Shasta Abbey Press, 1990) p.73.
5. You can read more about Existence Time Flow in the Uji section of *Zen is Eternal Life*, 1st Ed (Mt. Shasta, CA: Shasta Abbey Press, 1987) p. 198.
6. *The Scripture of Avalokiteshwara, The Litany of the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives for the Laity* (Shasta Abbey Press, 1990) p.48. This Scripture is sung in our daily services.
7. Contemplation is a Refuge taking activity that is as a bridge between meditation and daily life. I have written about it in detail in two previous Journal articles, *Contemplation and the Mind that Seeks the Way*, Part 1 (Summer issue 2009) and Part 2. (Winter issue 2009/2010). These are on our website, should anyone wish to read them.
<http://www.placeofpeacewales.org/>
8. If anyone finds this confusing please contact me directly, I shall be pleased to hear from you.
9. This is a line from a Wesak invocation, *Awake, all Buddhist people, The Liturgy of the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives for the Laity* (Shasta Abbey Press, 1990) p. 239.
10. Reverend Master Jiyu-Kennett, *How To Grow a Lotus Blossom* 1st Ed.(Mt.

Shasta, CA: Shasta Abbey Press, 1977) p. 232.