

What's Up with Zen Service Forms, Bells, and Ritual?

By Mary Ann Sacksteder

Part 1, An Overview

Dear Dharma Friends,

No matter how long you've practiced, Zen forms and rituals can be confusing. I hope this little guide will provide a few helpful principles.

First, a little about forms and ritual in general. The forms are the agreed upon guidelines of when and how to bow, walk, chant, ring the bells, etc. Think of the forms as the bones of our ritual and common practice. They support us in coming together as a community while allowing us to remain completely our own selves. Ritual comes alive for us when we rest in the forms and enter into an experience of the teachings, free to engage deeply with our entire bodies, senses, mind...our whole being!

All the various sounds used in Zen ritual have a purpose, they aren't random. Imagine that you live in China or Japan long before clocks, watches, cell phones, microphones, speakers and all the trappings of modern life. Imagine living in a monastery with spacious gardens and a zendo. Perhaps you are working in the fields of this monastery and hear the bells in the zendo. You would know by their sounds what was happening during the service and perhaps could be connected with the ritual while you were in the garden. If you were in the zendo, how would you know when to do things or what was going on or going to happen next? You would rely on patterns of sound, from bells of all sizes, drums of various sorts, wood blocks, and other instruments. All of the sounds you heard would have a purpose, telling you what was going on, what's coming next, and what action you would perform.

That is still true today. An easy example is the bells to announce our periods of sitting meditation (zazen) and walking meditation (kinhin). To begin a period of zazen the bell will be struck three times. If the bell is struck two times to end the period of zazen, that is telling you that the next thing will be kinhin or outdoor walking. However, if you only hear one bell at the end of zazen, then you know that what follows will be something like a talk or service.

Let's think about service. We usually use a small bell, a large bell, and sometimes a wooden drum called a mokugyo. There will be a person who leads the chant, letting us know what we're going to chant, the pitch, and the tempo. The person playing the bells is called the doan, the person playing the mokugyo is the mokugyo player, the chant leader is the kokyo, and all together they are referred to as the doan ryo. There will, also, be a priest who is leading the service and is called the doshi. These are roles that a person steps into, fulfills, and then leaves. If you are the doan you embody that role. Thinking of it this way is helpful because it frees you a little from getting all wound up about whether or not you're doing it right. You just enter the role, do the best you can in that moment, and then step out of the role and let it go. Perhaps not so easy, but a great practice!

And then there's chanting. We chant during service and sometimes, at the discretion of the teacher, as part of a sitting. Some people think Zen chanting is pretty boring, consisting of only one note. The key is to realize that our chanting is actually a form of singing. In singing the breath and the sound keep going, as you would when singing a song, except you sing on one note. When we speak we take pauses and follow the punctuation marks to emphasize the meaning. However, in our chanting the idea is to create an on-going cushion of sound, without pauses and without breaks at the punctuation. If each person breathes randomly anywhere except at the punctuation, the sound will continue unbroken and the experience is one of being carried along and supported by the sound. You can surrender yourself to the sound and let the chant hold you. Rather than trying to understand the meaning of the chant with your discursive mind, you embody the chant through the use of your senses. When the chant infuses your entire body in this way, it stays with you, returns to you, and informs you in conscious and unconscious ways as you go about your activities.

Finally, the good news is that even if you don't know the bell's purpose or you don't really get the sense of chanting, you can just relax and enjoy all the sounds as a sensory experience. Even without understanding you will naturally enter into the ritual completely because sound is processed by the brain differently from rational thought. The sounds themselves will call you home to your deep being, and you will be satisfied.

Part 2, About Specific Forms

Welcome to the 2nd part of this article on Zen Service Forms, Bells, and Ritual! Let's start by thinking of the forms as little rituals that aid us in bringing our attention, our whole selves, to the present moment. These forms help us quiet our minds and focus ourselves in the present moment.

Several years ago, when doing summer practice at Tassajara, I was complaining a bit to one of the resident priests about some form or other. She turned to me and said, with astonishment, "but the forms are here to help you!" At first I didn't understand her meaning, but as I thought about it and continued to practice, I began to understand.

The way we hold our hands, sit, walk, bow are all ways to establish us *in our bodies*, just present, here, now, with full and grounded awareness. For example, at Green Gulch, Tassajara, or Zen Center, the form is to enter and leave the zendo leading with the foot that is nearest to the hinge of the door. We don't do that in Dharma Heart Zen or in Everyday Zen, and perhaps to some it seems like a silly, arbitrary, and annoying little rule. But in a way it is quite wonderful. When I enter the zendo and pay attention to the hinge and to my foot entering, my mind immediately focuses into the present of my body in space, and entering in this way brings

me into a sense of entering a sacred, timeless space. It is a ritual of entrance and is both powerful and supportive.

Let's think together about some of these embodied forms that we practice. As you read these words, let yourself reflect on your own understanding of these forms. I am speaking of my own understanding, limited as it likely is. What meaning, if any, do you find in these forms? Do they support you? Do they help you return to your deep, whole self in the present moment? Or are they a nuisance or all of the above.

Here are some of these forms:

- We step into the zendo and, after a few steps, we make a little gassho bow toward the altar. Zen can be said to be about face to face meetings, Buddha to Buddha. Here, we are stepping into the zendo and greeting, face to face, the whole space, and in a way thanking the space for its presence and support of our practice and our lives.
- When we approach our cushion to sit down, we bow to the cushion, thanking it and our space for the support we will receive. Then we turn and bow to the room and community, thanking them for the support we will receive. Additionally, with those bows we are offering our whole selves to the effort of zazen and to the support of our dharma sisters and brothers. Similarly, when we leave the zendo, we bow to our cushion and to the room, in gratitude for the support we received.
- There are specific instructions for how to sit in zazen put forth by Dogen in his fascicle entitled *Fukanzazengi, Universally Recommended Instructions for Zazen*. One thrust of the instructions is that we align our bodies in such a way that we are relaxed, yet upright, and in a posture that allows our breath to be supported by our diaphragm and to flow freely from our nostrils to our lungs and back again, over and over. While Dogen recommends the full or half lotus postures, in our practice we may sit in a chair, kneeling on a bench, or even lying down if our we have injuries that require that. No matter what, the point is to be grounded on the earth and to really feel the full breath completely, in and out, all the way to the end of the exhale, letting go, and picking up again with the natural impulse to inhale.
- In our practice the recommended position for the hands is called the universal mudra, where the fingers of the left hand rest on the fingers of the right hand and the thumb tips are touching. Maintaining the mudra helps to keep one's attention focused, to stay connected to one's body, and to prevent the mind from wandering off so easily. You may have noticed that sometimes you'll be sitting and suddenly you realize that your thumb tips have come apart and you are starting to drift or doze off. It can help at this point to bring your attention back to your thumb tips. Norman Fischer once said during

an Everyday Zen sesshin, “just put your mind in your mudra.” That instruction has been very helpful to me from time to time. Of course, depending upon our physical ability, we may need to have a different position for our hands. Perhaps what is important is that the position you establish be comfortable, relaxed but requiring some energy to maintain, and that you focus on maintaining it throughout your period of zazen if possible. This idea of relaxed but with energy is important; not slack but not rigid, completely present.

- Then there are full bows, or standing bows done as deeply as possible if one is not able to do a full bow. Full bows are usually made toward the altar (though in certain ceremonies a student and teacher make them toward one another or a student may make such a bow toward the sangha). I’m thinking here of our bows made toward the altar, which usually has on it a representation of Buddha and/or various other bodhisattvas such as Manjushri (wisdom), Quan Yin (compassion), etc.

When speaking of bowing in this way, Norman Fischer sometimes characterizes this physical action, for himself, as giving his whole self over to Buddha. What do we mean by giving ourselves over to Buddha? We can think of it as giving ourselves to and honoring Buddha as a great teacher, as giving ourselves to and honoring our own Buddha nature, as throwing ourselves into the arms of awakening or the potential of living an awakened life, a life where we fully understand our deep interbeing with all things. In bowing we give ourselves to and honor the Buddha nature which we all are in essence. We give ourselves to and honor all the ancestors. We give ourselves to and honor the sangha, and to all that supports us. Perhaps you have other ways of understanding this practice of bowing fully, giving oneself over completely.

- When we are standing or walking in the zendo there are two basic hand positions that we use:

Shashu, which is standing with our hands at our hara or midsection, the left hand in a fist and the right hand curled around the left with the right thumb on top of the left thumb. We are in this position when standing in the zendo, walking during kinhin, or when we are chanting.

In gassho our palms are together with our fingers pointing upward and are at mid-chest level. We use gassho when making an offering or when greeting or honoring someone.

Just right now take a moment to hold your hands in each of these positions for a few breaths each. Let your awareness sink into the sensation of it.

Practically, it is really helpful to have these two positions because basically it means you don't have to worry about what to do with your hands! And the positions help you once again to remain steady, focused, and grounded.

- In the zendo we often alternate periods of zazen with short periods of slow walking, called kinhin. During kinhin we synchronize our breath with the movement of our steps in the process of slow, mindful walking. In kinhin our hands are in the shashu position. Again, this is a body practice.

Kinhin is not a break or a random event: it is a continuation of zazen, zazen extended into our standing and walking. This may seem a little confusing because sometimes the instructions given during longer retreats refer to taking a bathroom break or whatever is needed during kinhin. Well, kinhin is the time to take a break for certain necessary functions. Even so, kinhin is still a continuation of zazen, of zazen mind. The more we get used to extending zazen into our movement in kinhin, the more we will embody the feeling of zazen in all of our activities throughout our days.

This all can seem like a lot. How can we ever do it?! The short answer is that we can't. We will make one mistake after another. And that's just fine. In 2015 I participated in a two-month residential practice period at Green Gulch. There were so many opportunities to make mistakes, and I made many. The corrections came to me on a daily basis. I made so many mistakes and was corrected so often that pretty soon I had to accept that it was no big deal. I could just get over myself and try again. So, this aspect of our practice: following forms, making mistakes, staying present, and trying again is humbling in a very wonderful way. We can lighten up, no need to beat ourselves up. Just as in sitting zazen, we keep coming back to the present moment, practicing with forms allows us to deeply understand that perfection is merely another illusory creation of the mind. What a liberating way to practice!

Part 3, Forms during Service and Meaning of the Bells, etc.

Now we come to thinking about our forms when we do service. This description will mostly reflect the current practice we do in Dharma Heart Zen and that you would probably see in Everyday Zen services. San Francisco Zen Center and associated sanghas are basically the same, but with more bells, drums, chants, etc.

Let's start at the beginning of a typical service and work our way through. Take your time if you are reading this article. Give yourself time to visualize the actions being described.

- When service begins everyone stands in shashu, grounded, attentive. There will be bells at various points throughout. These bells tell the community what to do, what the doshi is doing, and sometimes they tell the doshi what to do.
- The service centers on the actions of the doshi, the officiating priest. When someone steps into the doshi role, that person becomes the center of a mandala that is created by all in the zendo. The whole service is a mandala, and the doshi performs offerings and other actions on behalf of the assembled community. When the doshi makes an offering it is as if the entire community is actually making the offering.

To start the service the doshi, as center of the mandala, does a standing bow, goes to the altar, and offers incense or flower petals, and then returns to the bowing mat. This offering is a form of gratitude and reverence, and a time of calling in support of the ancestors and awakened beings. The doshi usually silently chants a verse to express this gratitude and calling in. There are various forms of the verse. I silently chant this one from Thich Nhat Hanh:

*“In gratitude we make this offering
to all Buddhas and Bodhisattvas throughout space and time.
May it be as fragrant as earth herself,
reflecting our careful efforts,
our wholehearted mindfulness,
and the fruit of understanding slowly ripening.
May we and all beings be companions of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas.
May we awaken from forgetfulness and realize our true home.”*

When the doshi completes the offering they take a small step back and make a standing bow as a bell is rung to signal the community that the offering is complete. As the doshi walks back to the bowing mat, another bell is rung as the doshi is about halfway back to the bowing mat. This bell signals the community that they are about to be doing full bows (or deep bows). Once the doshi reaches the back of the mat they do a little gassho bow, and a bell is rung when they do that. This bell begins a rolldown on the bell. During the rolldown the doshi and other priests who may be present lay out their bowing cloths. At that time the rest of the community put their hands into gassho and turn to face toward the altar.

A note about rolldowns: in general, they signify that a big event is about to happen, so be ready. During service rolldowns precede and signal bowing.

- Bowing: Once the doshi and any other priests have spread out their bowing cloths, there is a moment of silence. Then the doshi begins to bow. A large bell is rung at this point signaling the entire community to bow, full bows if possible. The doshi and the community will do three bows. The large bell is rung as the doshi starts each bow. The doan (person playing the bells) follows the doshi. Each doshi takes whatever time feels right to them in between bows, so the doan is very attentive to the doshi. Finally, on the doshi's third bow, another large bell is rung when their head touches the bowing mat. That bell tells everyone, in case they forgot to count, that this is the last bow.

After this first set of bows, the doshi goes again to the altar and makes another offering. The bells are similar, with a few exceptions. First, there is no bell when the doshi is halfway back. I'm not sure, but I think that is because the community *is not* going to join in the next set of three bows, which are done only by the doshi. Also, there is no rolldown because the doshi's bowing cloth is already out and it is only the doshi doing these bows. While the doshi is doing the three bows, the community is preparing to begin chanting a sutra. The large bell is wrung on each of the doshi's first two bows, but as the doshi starts the third bow the doan plays a "clunk" sound, which is called a stop on the bell. That signals the kokyo (chant leader) to announce the chant as the doshi completes their bows. There is no bell when the doshi's head touches the mat on this third bow because the community doesn't need a signal to tell them it's the last bow. I hope that's not too confusing. Really, as a member of the community during service, the main thing to remember is that your cue is the stop sound on the bell which means you are about to chant a sutra.

When the kokyo chants the name of the sutra, they do it at the speed and pitch that the chant will be. At the end of the chant announcement the large bell is rung one time, in the same tempo as the kokyo was chanting, and then the community follows the kokyo as the kokyo leads the chant. A side note for people who take the roles of kokyo and doan: stay centered in your breath as you chant and play the bells. That will help you to chant and play in a grounded way and in tempo.

- Let's talk about chanting, about what those bells are during the chant, and what the doshi is doing. When chanting sutras, the community is standing either facing each other as at Everyday Zen or at Zen Center, or the community faces in a circle or however we are aligned during our Dharma Heart Zen services. Our hands are in the shashu position when chanting a sutra.

Now is the time to think back to what I said in the first article in this series, specifically about chanting. This part about how we chant is so important, that I'm going to quote it

again here:

The key is to realize that our chanting is actually a form of singing. In singing the breath and the sound keep going, as you would when singing a song, except you sing on one note. When we speak we take pauses and follow the punctuation marks to emphasize the meaning. However, in our chanting the idea is to create an on-going cushion of sound, without pauses and without breaks at the punctuation. If each person breathes randomly anywhere except at the punctuation, the sound will continue unbroken and the experience is one of being carried along and supported by the sound. You can surrender yourself to the sound and let the chant hold you. Rather than trying to understand the meaning of the chant with your discursive mind, you embody the chant through the use of your senses. When the chant infuses your entire body in this way, it stays with you, returns to you, and informs you in conscious and unconscious ways as you go about your activities.

Now, back to the doshi and the bells. At the start of the sutra the doshi's hands are in the gassho position. A bell is rung several words into the sutra which signaling the doshi to put their hands back into shashu. Then, somewhere toward the middle of the sutra the large bell is rung signaling the doshi to go to the altar to make an offering. This bell also alerts the community to the fact that another offering is being made, so even though we are chanting we are involved in the offering. Once the doshi is finished making the offering and steps back, the large bell is rung again and the doshi returns to the back of the mat.

These two bells set off the offering, pointing out the specialness of this event. Some doshi's may silently chant one or another verse as they make offerings during sutras, or they may make up their own silent verses. I tend to silently send blessings for the wellbeing of all beings whenever I make these offerings during a sutra.

Toward the end of the sutra, usually in the last line or two, you will hear two small bells being rung, several words apart. The first one signals the doshi to put their hands back into gassho, and the second one signals everyone that the sutra is about to end. There is a stop sound on the bell again once the chant is finished, as if to emphasize that the chant is complete. (Side note: a few chants have no bells or have slightly different bells, but never mind that right now, as they are the exceptions to the main form.)

- That stop on the bell also signals the kokyo to either announce the next chant or to begin the eko. Let's say at this point that all the chants are completed and we are ready for the eko, which is the dedication of merit. What do we mean by the dedication of merit? That is our collectively giving back or sending out all the good energy we have

raised during our service, and we send that energy out as directed in the dedication.

The eko has a set form, within which there can be infinite variation. There are three parts:

- First, the kokyo chants something like this: *May we awaken Buddha's compassion and luminous mirror wisdom, chanting the (names of chants we chanted inserted here), we dedicate the merit of our practice together to...*
- Then the kokyo will raise their pitch a half step and will chant to whom and/or where all this good energy is going. The kokyo raising their pitch signals the doshi to do either a deep or a full bow for the duration of this part of the dedication.

Now here's something a little confusing. Unless a small bell is also rung when the kokyo raises their pitch, the community members remain standing in the shashu position and do not put their hands into gassho. If you were at any of the SF Zen Center practice centers you would put your hands in gassho during the dedication only if there is a little bell telling you to do so. That usually happens only for one particular eko. However, as human beings we have a natural impulse to want to put our hands into gassho and to bow when such a dedication is being offered. So, here in Dharma Heart Zen and at Everyday Zen you might see a mix of people remaining in shashu during the dedication or putting their hands into gassho. It's up to the teacher of the sangha to decide finally whether this is a big deal or not in terms of practice.

Back to the dedication by the kokyo. Once the dedication section is complete, the kokyo lowers their pitch by a half step. That signals the doshi to stand back upright. If there is a little bell rung at the same time it would be signaling the community to come up from their standing bow.

What is this raising and lowering of the pitch during the dedication really about? Just as the bells in the middle of a sutra mark off the importance of an offering on behalf of all beings, the raising and lowering of the pitch says that this section, sending out all this good energy into the world, is especially important and sacred.

- The third part of the eko follows as the kokyo continues, having lowered their pitch by a half step. At the end of the dedication the large bell is rung signaling everyone to join in as the kokyo begins chanting:

*All Buddhas, ten directions, three times
All Honored ones, Bodhisattvas, Mahasattvas
Wisdom beyond wisdom,
Maha, Prajna, Paramita.*

At the start of “all Buddhas” the doshi and the whole community put their hands into gassho. The members of the community turn toward the altar. After “three times” the doan rings the large bell, signaling the doshi to go to the altar to make a final offering. There is another large bell rung after “Mahasattvas.” Then, when the doshi finishes the offering a small bell is rung several times with increasing speed, turning into a rolldown. The small bells and roll downs signal any priests in attendance to once again lay out their bowing cloths, and signal the community to get ready to bow.

This all Buddhas phrase is once again calling in, honoring, and thanking all the helpers who support our lives. I view this verse also as a way of calling in the deepest parts of ourselves in service to one another.

- The last section of the service is the closing bows. As at the opening of the service, the doan rings a bell (this time a small bell) as the doshi and the community bow, ringing the bell on each bow and on the doshi’s head touch to the mat.

Once the three bows are completed the doshi and the community put their hands back into shashu and wait. At this time the doshi may silently offer a brief sort of blessings or dedication on behalf of all. When the doshi is ready, they put their hands into gassho, take a step back, and bow to the altar. A small bell is rung on this bow. The small bell signals the community to put their hands into gassho, turn toward the altar, make a standing bow, and return their hands to shashu. After another moment the doshi, hands in shashu, takes another step back and bows to the altar. The community does not bow with the doshi this time.

Finally, in our sangha during a normal service, the doshi (especially if it is Chris) will take another step back and will make a gassho bow to the community. The doan rings two small bells, with a slight pause between each ring of the bell, at which time the community makes a gassho bow back to the doshi and the service is ended.

There are a couple of other variations:

For instance, if I am the doshi I will walk to my seat and make a gassho bow to my seat (and the doan rings the small bell once) and then I turn to the community and make a bow in shashu (and the doan rings the small bell once), at which time the community returns my shashu bow. Sometimes when the doshi does it this way they make a final gassho bow to the community so the community responds with a gassho bow. Basically, the community returns the bow in whatever hand position the doshi makes when bowing toward the community.

One other variation may take place during sesshin or following a formal ceremony. In this case, following the first two closing bows at the mat, the doshi turns and walks out the door of the zendo. When the doshi (and any attendants) are out the door, the doan rings the small bell two times, with a slight pause in between, signaling the end of the service or ceremony.

In conclusion, please note that it doesn't really matter if this is helpful or confusing to you. Don't get hung up on these words or trying to think it all out. This guide may serve as a reference, or it may be useless to you. In any case, what is most important is that you bring your whole self to the service and other forms, follow as best you can, and over time all of this will ground itself in your body and will continue to support you beyond your wildest imagining.

Disclaimer: This represents my own understanding of our forms and as such may be flawed. So please take it all with about a hundred grains of salt!