

Forms and Ritual talk 1: Individuality and the Forms

I want to open a conversation with a series of talks on forms and rituals.

Our Zen practice, like everything else, has a way we go things. As you know our set of ways of doing things are often collectively called the forms, or just the form. The form that our embodied practice takes.

People have all kinds of reactions to the bowing and little rules and things. We're holding all of that pretty lightly here in our temporary home where the physical space is so fluid. When we arrived tonight we were in a big church social hall but then we set up our cushions just so, a very particular arrangement, and the timekeeper struck the sounding board in a very particular pattern and then like magic this space was transformed into a Soto Zen zendo - it seems to happen right around the end of the 2nd roll down. People stop chatting and their inner orientation turns towards formal practice.

There are lots of ways to look at the forms and respond to them. There's something about our culture that puts a big priority on "why" - why do we do it this way or that? What's the meaning and symbolism of this. We want to make a story of how different forms came to us or what they mean. And that is in the tradition too.

I was reading a bit in Shohaku Okamura's book *Living by Vow* about one take on the story of the prostration, especially the raising up of the hands once we get all the way down. He brought up a famous story of the Buddha before he was the Buddha, in a previous age and many lifetimes before his Buddhahood he felt a huge devotion to the Buddha of that era, Dipankara Buddha, and he was in a town where everyone was getting ready for the Buddha's arrival, but they've been heavy rains and the main road which Dipankara had to cross had flooded. So our Buddha to be was rushing around trying to fill in the flooded area with dirt and it wasn't working and Dipanakara was coming so he laid down in front of him and spread his long hair across the remaining wet area

and held up his hands for the Buddha to step onto. He must have had really thick long hair. So we love that.

And by the way a neat thing is Desiree's starting to lead a series of discussions at our Sunday 10am Zen Alive program based on this same book: Living by Vow. So there are a few opportunities coming up to explore. Another is the Wednesday night study group that Talus and Chris are hosting based on Norman Fischer and Sue Moon's What is Zen? Which also explores all of this.

But other times there's no story we know of. Or we make up a story like we usually turn to the right which is the way the sun progresses across the horizon in the northern hemisphere. Who knows if that's why we do it.

There are a big long host of forms and rules we haven't implemented here. And I'm sure there are many more that I don't know about. It's all relative: if you're deeply steeped in a more elaborate and precise form what we do may be shockingly casual and not very formal at all.

Sometimes there's the idea that our forms are particularly strange and different and not really appropriate for us because they came from an Asian tradition. Is this all one big bunch of cultural appropriation? Maybe so but if you look closely all around there are lots of forms which are equally, well: form-like. I was going to say "strange" but that's just a value judgement word meaning "different from what I'm used to."

Raizelah and I were walking to the Bellewether area at the Harbor at just before sunset the other night. We walked by the Coast Guard station and there were 3 young Coast Guard officers standing at attention with the left hand in front and the right hand around their backs. I guess that's formal sailor's stance. They were standing utterly still and were totally silent. Their faces pretty blank. It really didn't seem particularly different from Zen students standing shashu in the zendo waiting for the bell.

We slowed down to watch. I looked more closely and I saw there were three flags on the flagpoles and in their left hands they each had a rope - a line - for one of the flags.

Then about 5 minutes later an announcement came over the loudspeaker and they started moving in unison taking down the flags. Still not chatting or smiling. Very serious and somber. A ritual of taking down the flag. There are lots of rituals around flags in the military I think. A flag, a rakusu, an altar, what's the difference really.

Forms are also a way of creating meaning. Because we do it, it must matter. And sometimes it matters very very much to people. And they can get pretty uptight about doing everything the right way.

Or sometimes I'll get too worried about not offending anyone by "correcting" them that I don't tell them the way we do it and in the end they feel deprived and limited by that - most of us want to know the right way to do things. We want to be right.

And yet the forms are also pretty arbitrary and they evolve and change over time and when conditions change. Some places are more resistant to change, more conservative in the original meaning of that word, other places more fluid.

A big learning for me when we went to Japan in 2010 was there are a multiplicity of forms. It does all the way to the top: the two headquarters temples of Soto Zen, Eiheiji and Sojiji, have some big differences in how they do service for instance. One I remember is the jisha starts out standing next to the doshi at the bowing mat holding the burning incense and walks up with him or her to the altar and then there's a funny little exchange where the jisha hands the incense to the doshi to does the gesture of offering it - holding it to the forehead and so on - but then hands it back to the jisha to actually put it in the incense bowl. That's the Sojiji style, ours is from the Eiheiji style. And then each of these two headquarters temples has a bunch of temples below them and each of those a set below them and so on - it's literally a bit pyramid scheme with each temple following the temple above them (and giving donations to the temple above them, mandatory donations) so each of these branches ends up with a different variation on the levels above. Like an evolutionary tree.

This corrected a misunderstanding I heard when I started at SF Zen Center in the 1980's around "how they do it in Japan" as if there was one way it's done there. There really isn't.

And the other really interesting learning I had was the all of the Japanese religions - at least all I've experienced: Shinto, Shingon Buddhism, Pure Land Buddhism, have very similar gestures and forms and a very similar feeling. They are much more similar than different. It all made me wonder are we practicing particularly a long line of Zen, and in China called Chan, traditions or are we more practicing a branch of Japanese religion and culture.

All of Zen also has a really interesting quality of pushing against individualism. There's the famous Suzuki Roshi staying that when the students were all in their street clothes hanging out he had trouble telling them apart but once they started wearing robes and learning the Zen forms he could really see their identities. Pretty interesting.

So doing the forms even though we're trying to do the same exact thing is also a way that something in us shines through, and that something wouldn't arise if we all just did whatever according to our preferences and usual ways of being.

The other thing that's kind of amazing about the forms is what a deep reminder of our embodiment they are. It's important I think to really invite our standing and walking and sitting down as a full body experience. And as we tune in more to our own bodies we can also have a deep feeling of connection with the other bodies in the room too. And little by little we start to move together as one body. We often feel and notice this more on the multi-day retreats we call sesshin. Some days of living quietly together and following the schedule and living within these forms can help us harmonize a diverse collection of different bodies and minds and hearts into one body-mind-heart. It can be amazingly beautiful.

And I've also often struggled with desiring that feeling - or perhaps it's some idea in my head about that feeling, memories mixed with wishes - so I can get

inordinately annoyed and judgey in my head if someone's not "getting it" around the forms. Is distracting us from the one body by not, to my eyes in a moment when I'm in that frame, just not doing it right. Not inhabiting the form. It can be little things like not holding your hands in shashu while walking in the zendo.

I worry about even mentioning that for fear you'll now be worried that I'm judging you. But that's okay I get it that it's my work to (a) accept what is better, and (b) find skillful and kind ways to let people know about these things either directly from me or through our system - through the ino and so on.

And of course I'll never get that quite right. I forget to let people know about things I've noticed. Or I wanted to but it didn't quite fit in. How are people supposed to learn if we never share our observations. Some people seem to be wired to pick this stuff up like a sponge from observation some people just aren't wired that way. Different learning styles. Or I - damn the torpedos - push right up there and let them know - don't do it that way, please - and embarrass them in front of others. Which can be harmful. And it can also end up being useful to them to digest that experience too! So easy to be too much one way or the other.

So forms can also be a kind of mirror for us. Sometimes that mirror shows me a peaceful settled mind appreciating everyone deeply and appreciating our togetherness and how it's expressed and supported by our practice together of forms. Other times that mirror shows me impatience, or fear of responding unhelpfully or being too conflict avoidant to respond at all or just unsettledness.

What does the mirror of form show you.

The other things that's interesting is that traditional teachings hardly mention the forms. And when they do it is absolutely not to explain them or give a rationale for them. It's just to describe them. There are many books of recorded sayings and koan stories and so many sutras and commentaries but not so much on what it actually looks like to practice Zen - much of it's transmitted

orally I assume and just understood. The monks who were first reading those koan stories in the 11th century all had a very clear picture in their heads of what the protagonists in those stories were doing day after day, they had a deep sense of the background routines against which the occasional surprising encounter between a master and student happened. You didn't retell and write down the stories of what normally happened every day, you told the stories of the surprising turns, the powerful teachings, the unusual students and teachers.

But there was usually a forms guide at each monastery where what to do was written down. And that was of great interest to Dogen. He wrote detailed instructions for his monks. Especially once they established Eiheji.

I want to share with you a few pages of instructions for the monks. This is after the 3am wake up bell and the initial zazen period without their okesas on. They slept in the Sodo - the sangha hall which was also the zendo so they literally rolled out of bed into zazen posture. He says in there they weren't even allowed to fold up their bedding at first. There's a proper time for that. First zazen. Then get to get up and go to the bathroom to wash, brush their teeth, I assume they get to use the toilet then too!

Bendoho p. 65 to about 70.

No explanation really - just this is the form. This is how we do it. These are the rules and customs of this place.

And it does get very detailed. When we visiting a temple called Hokyoji they gave each one of us this book they'd produced detailing the forms in Japanese and English with lots of photos of a sample monk doing each form correctly. I have to admit I never really looked at it until this afternoon when I was interested to learn there are four styles of kinhin. They are carefully diagrammed and explained over several pages. We usually do style #1 but there are 3 more. I will share with you.

What I really hope to explore deeply in these talks is our ritual forms about service - bowing and chanting. Generating and dedicating merit. I feel so

blessed to often get to be in the middle of the room as doshi. But I never feel like I'm separate doing something special that others don't get to do. I feel more like a conduit. Like there's an energy that the sangha is tapping into that I get to offer to Buddha on all of our behalf.

So I'll see what else I can learn about service and do a bit of a blow by blow. At least one person has been asking me to write up a kind of guide to service for newer people too so hopefully this puts me in the right mode to attend to that also.

Let's discuss. How did the forms strike you at first? How do they strike you now? Do you find them helpful? A barrier? What do they show you about yourself if anything?