

BOWING



BY REV. ZUIKO REDDING

Before we sit down to do zazen, we perform a gassho bow, hands together in front of face, the body inclined a bit, we bend at the hips once towards our zafu, then once away. In the zendo, it's a greeting to our neighbors and to those across the room. "Hello. Thank you for your presence and your effort." We greet the whole universe, which is sitting with us. "Hello. Thank you for sitting with me." We bow even when no other person is present.

This is not the only time we bow. We do it when entering and leaving the zendo, when doing services, sometimes when we greet one another. Sometimes we just bob our heads. Sometimes we touch our foreheads to the floor and lift our hands in a full prostration. There's a good deal of it going on. So, what's it all about and where does it come from?

Bowing is a salutation and an expression of respect. Shunryu Suzuki said we should bow to everything we meet. Jack Kornfield talks about how, in the Thai monastery where he practiced, he was expected to bow to all the other monks and how at first, he resented having to bow to monks he didn't respect. His solution? He learned to find something in each person that he could bow to. He could respect each person: there was no longer "good person," "bad person."

There was only “this person.” Can we do that? Bowing is also about making our spirits more flexible and gentle; about giving up our obstinate, stubborn, dualistic mind that centers on ourselves as the most important thing in the universe and on our ideas as the reality of how things are and should be. If we bow, gradually our hearts will follow. In Japan I heard the story of Kishizawa Ian-roshi, who when asked how low one’s head should be in bowing to the floor, answered that the forehead should touch the floor. He added, “I would like to bow even lower, but the floor stops me.” He felt that he had that much arrogance and selfish stubbornness to get rid of.

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The meaning of bowing comes only through bowing. Blooming in the heart, it is a different flower for each of us. At Shogoji, we did about fifty full prostrations in the course of morning services. (And all before breakfast!) I used to think of them as Zen calisthenics, dutifully holding my robes and trying to do them in proper form. Then one morning as I knelt touching my head to the floor, I remembered sleeping this way as a small child. Bowing this way, I realized I had the same confident trust in the Dharma as an innocent child has for his or her parents.

It’s best to give up all the ideas I’ve been talking about and just bow. Bowing is the same as doing zazen - just do it, with no you, no bow, no “Did I do it right?” no “Does it mean what it’s supposed to?” When you do it completely, there is no need for anything extra.

***Zuiko Redding** grew up in Texas where she encountered Zen as a university student. She studied in Milwaukee with Tozen Akiyama and in Minneapolis with Dainin Katagiri. In 1992 she was ordained in Japan by Tsugen Narasaki. She remained to practice under his direction at Zuioji Monastery and its mountain training center, Shogoji. She received certification as a teacher in the Soto tradition from Rev. Narasaki in 1996 and returned to the US in 1997. She is a member of the American Zen Teachers’ Association and of the Soto Zen Buddhist Association. Zuiko is one of Rightview Online’s Guiding Teachers.*

