Bowing & Chanting

November 16, 2023

We do a lot of bowing and chanting around here. But it’s not more than we do in the outside world. It’s just that we bow physically here. In the outside world, we bow mentally. You can ask yourself as you go through the day, what do you bow to? Do you bow to your moods? Do you bow to your fear of other people’s power? Do you bow down to your lust, to your aversion, to your delusion? If you don’t like bowing down to those things, it’s good to practice bowing down to something you actually respect. It’s what the Buddha and the Dhamma and the Sangha represent. It’s not just the Buddha as a person or the Dhamma he taught or the monastic Sangha. They’re all the great, noble ones of the past and the present. It also refers to qualities of the mind. In the Buddha’s case, compassion, wisdom, and purity. If you really want to take refuge, you try to bring these qualities into yourself. The Dhamma teaches virtue and compassion. Concentration, discernment, release. The Sangha represents your willingness to practice the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma. In other words, not just in accordance with your preferences, but in accordance with what the Dhamma really demands. It’s aimed at disenchantment, dispassion, and the freedom that comes from dispassion. These are all qualities you want to develop within yourself. You want them to take precedence. So when you bow down, think of yourself bowing down to those qualities inside you, and then look at them. Are they strong? Are they weak? What other things do they have to battle with as you go through the day in terms of other things you bow down to? It’s good to have clear priorities. The act of physically bowing down keeps reminding you what really is important in life. What do you really respect? As for the chanting, you can think of all the different things that are going through your mind right now. How much garbage there is that goes through our minds. I knew someone who’d been an exchange student in Mexico. The Mexican hosts were throwing a party one night, and they were singing some Mexican folk songs. Then they asked the Americans to sing some American folk songs. The Americans looked at one another. They were at a loss. So they ended up singing things like “Gulligan’s Island.” Or is it “Gilligan’s Island?” “Gilligan’s Island.” Sorry, I’ve been away for a long time. Commercial jingles. A lot of garbage goes through our heads. Think of what it’s going to be like as you get older, death approaches, and weird things come running through your head. You want to have some good things running through your head instead. This is why we chant. You may have trouble understanding the meaning of the chants, but you can look at the translations. Of course, the question is, why do we chant in Pali? So that you don’t have to put up with other people’s translations all the time, you can think of the meaning, express it to yourself in your own words. And think also of the fact that as you’re chanting, you’re chanting the same things that Ajahn Mahan would chant, that Ajahn Lee would chant, all the way back from many, many centuries. So you can translate the words into your own words. Of course, here in the monastery, we chant what the abbot decides we’re going to chant. But when you’re on your own, there are lots of different chants you can try for yourself. When I was in Thailand my first year, I spent a lot of time alone in the mountain. I found that the chants were my friends. I got to choose the chants whose meaning I found meaningful. And as you chant them again and again, you find they start running through your head at other times of the day as well. And as you become more and more habitual, then as you get older, as you approach death, these are the things that will be running through your mind, or at least there’s a good chance there will be. So you want to counteract a lot of the messages of the world, because what is their message? They want you to abide by work, work, work, and the economy. And then when you’re no longer of any use to the economy, they basically throw you away. You don’t want their thoughts, their values, running your life. So we bow and we chant as a way of reminding ourselves of what our true values are. The Dhamma is something bigger than we are. It’s a whole way of life. We’re also part of a much larger community that shares these values. Back in the ancient world, the Stoics made this point that what forms a community, what makes a community, is the fact that you have values in common. And you make a community that may not have the same values as the person living next door to you, but you do have the same values as people that you respect, wherever they may be. So as you bow and as you chant, you’re connecting with that much larger community, both in space and in time. So as we meditate, it’s not just us sitting here, right here, right now, each individually working on our minds. That’s part of it. After all, you have to do the work for your mind. Other people have to do the work for their minds. But we do have values in common, and that can be strengthening to us as you think about that and as you engage in these practices. So if you find that you have any resistance to the bowing and the chanting, ask yourself why. And remind yourself that you’re bowing otherwise anyhow. So try to choose good things to bow to, both the general values of the practice and the techniques. We’re working on skills here, not just vague values. Skills that embody the values as you try to develop more mindfulness, more alertness, more ardency in the practice. And giving yourself a specific technique to work with helps set a standard for you to aim at. Otherwise, you just muddle around, do a little bit of this, a little bit of that, and you don’t get stretched. The technique is there to stretch you. Unfortunately, it’s not a technique that just puts your mind through the grinder. You’re asked to look at your breathing, what feels good. What do you want to do with the breath? You get to choose. What do you do to get the best results out of it? So there’s a sense of fullness, a sense of ease, pleasure, simply by the way you breathe. How do you do that? You get to explore. So it’s not just submitting yourself to an ironclad regimen. You’re being asked to develop a skill. It’s just going to exercise, on the one hand, your desire to do this well, and then to develop your own ingenuity in how you go about it. But you want something that stretches you. The practice is here to demand more of you than you might ordinarily demand of yourself, which is why we want to bow down to those values, to remind ourselves that it really is worthwhile. We really do want to grow. We really do want to mature. The Buddha does us honor. He treats us like adults. Even when he was teaching his seven-year-old son, he was teaching him how to be an adult. And a lot of that has to do with realizing there are areas in which you have to stretch yourself so you can grow. So bow down to the values, bow down to the skills, as you choose the chance to chant to yourself when you’re on your own. Choose the ones that mean the most to you. And think about them. We want to be mindful of them. We always say that when you’re meditating and listening to a Dhamma talk at the same time, you want to focus mainly on your meditation. But when you’re chanting, try to think about the meaning, what it implies. It gives you something to think about. It pulls you away from all the garbage that’s being disseminated by the media, no matter how important the news is. It gets old very fast. Think about all the information you picked up from the news only, say, a couple months ago. It’s not worth much now. But the news you get from the Dhamma, the news that the mind can be trained, the news that the mind can find freedom through dispassion, think about that. That’s something that’s always true. So as you chant, memorize the chants that become part of you. You’re chanting something that has good values, good values that are consistently true, always relevant. What better thoughts could you have in mind?

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