



Oshōkō, Dokkyō and Ritual

For many, many centuries, Buddhists practice has centered around the burning of incense and chanting – something the historical Buddha probably never did. In Shakyamuni Buddha's time, there was a growing opposition to the elaborate and lavish rituals of Brahmanism., the then dominant religion of India which evolved into the Hinduism of today. The Buddha did not see the point in a ritual that had no meaning, significance, or benefit. The following of his time was primarily engaged in study and meditation unhindered by problems of food, clothing, and housing – the latter being provided by the laity. It was only after the death of the Buddha that the chanting of his sermons were done at regular meetings to maintain his teachings. Some two hundred years later, these recitations were written down. As Buddhism spreads to other cultures and languages, these writings or *sutras* are translated into various languages. In Asia, the sutras were written in Pali, Chinese, and Tibetan. More recently, as Korean and Vietnamese changed to their own writing system to replace the Chinese characters, new translations were made. The traditional chanting in Korea and Vietnam however, remained in the Chinese writing system, like the Japanese reading of the Chinese characters.

From the death of the Buddha however, chanting, or the recitation of the sutras has been constant. And they have been chanted in the traditional languages of Pali, Chinese, or Tibetan. In the case of Pali, it is not a spoken language but the language of the sutras in the Theravada Buddhist countries: Burma, Cambodia, Laos,

Sri Lanka, and Thailand.. In China and Japan the Chinese characters are chanted. In Tibet, Bhutan, Sikkim, Ladakh, and Nepal the sutras are chanted in Tibetan. Although Vietnam and Korea changed from the Chinese characters to an alphabet system, the traditional chanting of the Chinese characters is still the norm.

In most Buddhist countries, Buddhists will say that the meaning of the chant is not in the intellectual understanding of it but in the body understanding it - in other words, as a meditative ritual. Thus the chanted language of the sutras is most often in a "dead" language, rendering it a more balanced combination of thought and pure sound. It is akin to singing "Oh come all ye faithful" in Latin rather than in English for those who know only a little Latin. The unimportance of "understanding" the chant seems to clash with American ideas however. There has always been the comment-question "Why do we have to chant in a language we don't understand? My answer is "Scooby oobie do...la, la, la, la, la...." Why is there no comment-question about singing nonsense syllables or scat singing?

To my mind, chanting in a largely unintelligible language is the sound of awakening, of the awareness of Oneness in sound. In *dokkyo*, or the straight chanting of a text, there is no set pitch or tempo. Each uniquely different voice simply recites out loud in a tempo that can naturally speed up or slow down. If this is done naturally, there is created layer upon layer of different voices all moving together – a oneness that nowhere implies sameness. Thus the only bad voice is one

that tries to imitate someone else who is only imagined to be better or more melodious. The Buddhist sense of harmoniousness involves being true to your own voice, whether you like it or not, and projecting it. This straightforward projection or participation of differences is harmony. Harmony does not necessarily depend upon agreement. Traditional chanting does this in a way that is visceral and to the point, unencumbered by calculations of "Do I sound good or bad, am I on pitch, etc. Even in the case of *shomyo*, where the text has a set melody, pitch and tempo are only approximate – in spite of recent attempts to make them more in line with western music. For Jodoshinshu, ours is a participatory ritual, not an observing ritual. It is to be done not listened to – and in the doing, one hears. It is to be done by you and me, and not left up to some specialist or one of supposed better voice or talent.

Oshoko, the burning of incense, the burning away of the three poisons of anger, greed, and ignorance; the demonstration of lifedeath as one simultaneous event in the moment (incense comes to life on burning, and at the same time, begins to die leaving ash) must be done, not observed. And what remains of this simultaneous birthdeath burning of incense? - the fragrance of this truth. In other words chanting is acting and moving beyond the controlling realm of the mind. Burning incense is acting out of the reality of each birth/death moment – just now, now gone, just now, now gone- namanda, namanda, namanda.

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