

Bowing

by Piya Tan

One of the first things I learned about Buddhism is bowing. As I grew older, I learned that when we bow, we respect the wisdom of the Three Jewels. The first time we bow, we recollect the Buddha's compassion, the second the Dharma's wisdom, and thirdly the Sangha's virtue.

During my five years' training as a monk in Thailand, I noticed people regularly bow to monks and to each other with their palms in anjali (lotus-like). In fact, I found that Buddhist practitioners of all traditions often bow to each other.

I also found out why Buddhists generally do not shake hands (though they may do so with non-Buddhists). Shaking hands began in the ancient wars in the west. When the armies wanted a truce, or to stop fighting, they extended their right hand (the weapon hand) to the other side.

But then I also read that either side could cheat. The left ("sinister") hand could hide a weapon and be used to attack the enemy! Clearly, the anjali is a better gesture of peace. We put both palms together. When both hands are clasped, there is no chance for any underhand trick: we really show respect to the other person.

Here "respect" means we bow to the person reminding him that he has the potential to be better and happier than he is now, even to become Buddha, if he wishes to.

It is not a matter of who is senior or junior, that junior should bow to senior first. (Traditionally, it is said that the Buddha is one who often greets others first.) We bow to the Dharma-potential or Buddha-seed in the person. Every time we bow to a person, we are silently saying: "Hey, you can be better and happier. You can awaken in this life. You can even become Buddha, if you wish to!"

In fact, when we bow before a Buddha image or some kind of Buddhist symbol, we are also reminding ourselves of our personal potential for good and awakening like the Buddha.

I was (still am) deeply moved when I saw a 2003 newspaper picture of Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong putting his palms together in anjali (or the colloquial Chinese "bai"). It was the height of the SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome) epidemic. He took pains to explain that this was a good way of greeting one another, as it is universally Asian, and also a healthy way of doing it as we need not have bodily contact. During the 2009 Chinese New Year period, I saw another picture of SM Goh "bai-ing" to some people. It's inspiring to see that he is still showing a good local example.

Once I met the local leader of a large foreign Buddhist mission, a VIP layman who was shaking hands with everybody at a Buddhist temple. When he came to me to shake my hands, I put my palms in anjali, and told him this is how we should do it! He seemed surprised. Maybe foreign missions need to "go native"!

Occasionally, I will go to the Shuang Lin temple in Toa Payoh to give talks to various Dharma camps. There was one occasion when, as soon as I got out of the taxi, I bowed before the first shrine I

saw. The student who chaperoned me told me that it was actually a Daoist temple. (It was located right next to the Shuang Lin temple.)

I told him it was all right for me, because when I bow, my mind thinks of the Buddha. So I am bowing to the Buddha—which reminds of me a story a Sikh once told me. A Sikh was sitting with his legs pointing to a holy shrine in India, and a Hindu priest scolded him saying he should not point his legs to “God.” The Sikh replied: “That’s hard! God is everywhere. So tell me where I can point my feet where there is no God!”

Even so, whenever I bow, wherever I bow to, I think of the Buddha. I do not have a Buddha statue on my home shrine because I keep giving them away to people who needed an image for themselves. I only have a beautiful Kannon given to me by a Japanese teacher before he left for Japan. Although I am more inclined to early Buddhism than any religion, I enjoy bowing before Kannon (Japanese Guanyin) who embodies the Buddha’s compassion.

Guanyin is Buddha in my mind. When I see a cross, too, I feel like bowing because it represents four spokes of the Dharma Wheel! When I see an empty niche in a mosque, I am reminded of the true emptiness that the Dharma leads to. When I see the numerous Hindu gods, I think, wow! the Buddha is the Teacher of all such gods. Aren’t we such a big spiritual family!

My youngest nephew, too, has an inspiring story of faith to tell. His father was forcefully converted into Christianity in his teens, and grew up to be a church elder. When my nephew was still schooling, although he was inclined to Buddhism, his father insisted that he attended church (as a “family tradition”). Reluctantly but dutifully, he joined in the Sunday church prayers. He told me that he would mentally recite words like “Namo tassa...” throughout the service. And as soon as it was over, he would cycle half way across town, just in time for the Buddhist Puja in a local temple, and be with the friends he really felt good with!

Let us constantly anjali and bow to each other in the Three Jewels.

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For David Attenborough’s response to hate-mails from creationists, see:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/jan/27/david-attenborough-science>.