

Bear River Meditation Group Lecture Series July, 2017

Scriptures, Sutras, Invocations - Chanted, Spoken, Unspoken

Talk 2: Sung Scriptures, Litanies, Invocations and Our Practice

*The unsurpassed penetrating and perfect Truth is seldom met
with even in a hundred thousand myriad kalpas.*

Now we can see and hear it. We can remember and accept it.

I vow to make the Buddha's Truth one with myself.

Talk 2: Sung Scriptures, Litanies, Invocations and Our Practice

For centuries the monks of a Benedictine monastery in France had chanted the Divine Office 8 times every day, even getting up at 3am to sing the Night Offices. Some members of the monastic community decided that this amount of singing was a waste of time so at a certain point in the 1960s they decided to give up their chanting. They'd been tired all the time, and thought it was because of lack of sleep as they got up for the Night Offices. The monks started to sleep through the night, yes, but the more they slept, the more tired they became. There was also a significant increase in bickering among the monks. They became listless and fatigued. Even when their schedule was further altered to allow more sleep, they were constantly weary. A change in diet was implemented but the monks' health did not improve.

Then Dr. Alfred Tomatis, a noted voice and hearing specialist, visited the monastery. He found 70 out of 90 monks were bedridden or in their cells, completely exhausted, incapable of completing their religious duties. After investigating, Dr. Tomatis suggested to the Abbot of the monastery - quite counterintuitively - that the monks start singing the offices again. And in fact, in just a few months, the monastery came back to life. Of those 70 weakened or debilitated monks, 68 got back their energy for singing, for thinking, for living their monastic vocation. When the monks resumed singing, harmony in their day-to-day relations was restored as well.

Dr. Tomatis concludes: *“Clearly singing is important. It energizes the singer as well as the listener...we can never sing too much, any more than we can listen to music too often. It is critical, however, to clarify which kind of music and singing nurtures us.”*

Singing matters. And sacred music makes a significant difference in religious practice. Rev. Master Jiyu knew this. In this talk I hope to address some of the ways her legacy of chanting supports us in our practice.

Rev. Master Jiyu knew what the ancestors and traditions that go all the way back to the Buddha knew: that music unlocks the scriptures and teaching in ways that the intellect **can not**.

It opens our hearts in ways that will alone **does not**. So, she set ten major Buddhist scriptures, twelve major litanies, numerous offertories, mantras, dedications, and the Homages to music. She created nearly 70 invocations that we sing throughout our liturgical year. She also laid the foundation for us to continue to create new invocations, mantras, and processions, either setting scriptures and text to the hymn tunes of past and the present or writing our own music. She left the cultural aspects of practice in Japan, and she brought the heart of Zen to us in the West. In literally translating the Scriptures, and in creating the ceremonial forms for their use, she understood clearly that Western chants and hymn tunes ARE the religious music of the West and would allow much greater access to the teaching. We don't chant in Japanese. We don't chant in the Japanese style of percussive monotone.

In doing this she did what Buddhism says you do: put the Scriptures - invocations and all forms of teaching - in a language that people can understand, although there is a tradition to keep mantras in Sanskrit. In the Buddha's time monks were not allowed to chant the Buddhist Dharma in classical Sanskrit. There is the story about the two monks, former Brahmins, very well-educated who complained to the Buddha that people were using bad grammar when they chant Sanskrit. The Buddha said NO to their request to have people chant in "proper" Sanskrit. He said the Dharma had to be taught in the language of those to whom it is being taught.

And so we sing in English. And we sing using the resonances of western sacred music. Rev. Master Jiyu chose plainsong and Anglican chants because they provide the means of supporting sacred text without getting in the way of the words. In putting words and music together, she used plainsong - with its single line of melody - for offertories, dedications, and some hymns; she used Anglican chant - with its lovely 4-part harmonies - for Scriptures, and litanies. And she drew on the wealth of the Christian hymnbooks and her own creativity to find both musical and textual vessels for *Buddhist* hymns that express gratitude, praise, invocation, or tell a story. She drew on the tradition that sings the names of the Buddhas, or the Bodhisattvas, or the Ancestors. And she did this with a broad ecumenical spirit drawing from Catholic, Methodists, Russian Orthodox and the Church of England traditions.

Buddhism originally developed within an oral culture, and as an **oral** tradition. Music in the Northern Indian culture where the Buddha lived was highly developed, both for secular ceremonial use and for religious purposes. Chanting was a means of memorizing religious texts. From the time of the Buddha, and before, religious practitioners chanted **to remember what is important** and to pass it along to those that would come after. In chanting we can remember what is important and "have it" when we need it.

Whether chanting the name of Buddha, or repeating a particular mantra, or singing an extended scripture like *The Surangama Sutra*, monks and laity alike are invited to “...*read, recite, write down, remember...*” We do these things in order to **become** what is read, recited, written down, remembered. Thus chanting has both a transformative purpose and a transformative effect!

When we chant, our faith grows. When we chant, we open our hearts and minds to that which is larger than ourselves. Rev. Master Jiyu said, “...*chanting is portable meditation.*” She knew that when we chant we go beyond our discriminative thoughts. When we chant we’re less likely to judge, to assess, or to expect. Rev. Master Jiyu was clear: “...*singing and chanting are taking meditation from the cushion and into the ceremony hall...*” or to another form of our “moving meditation” in the Ceremony of Daily Life. She explained our monastic schedule this way: first we sit and meditate in the Meditation Hall. Immediately following that we have Morning Service - with bows and breath. The bows open us to that which is larger than ourselves. The breath brings body and mind together. Bringing the mind back to our breath is our ceaseless practice. Vocal sound is audible breath, and in the sounds of chanting we begin and end with the breath. We breathe deeply, for we need robust columns of vibrating air to support our chant. But we also breathe deeply in chanting because this breath is itself rooted in the hara, our sitting place. The Sufi poet, Kabir, asks a telling question: “*Tell me, what is God? He is the breath inside the breath.*”

As in all things in Buddhism, it’s the attitude of mind that is the heart of any chanting, singing or ceremony. When we chant we ARE NOT performing. Whatever the form - single note chanting or singing an organ-accompanied four-part harmony invocation - the form itself *always* embodies of the mind of meditation. The monks at Eihei-ji, describing their chanting, noted that “...*(the chants) are not meant to hypnotize participants into apathy. The mind should become quite clear, receptive, so that it may know what is beyond concepts and beneath activities. In this experience mind and body must both participate.*”

Chanting is a means of “*cooling down our active mind*” as Barisheba describes in the **Shobogenzo** chapter “*Ceaseless Practice*”. The mind gives way to the breath. And the breath deepens.

Body and mind ARE one as Dogen says and chanting enhances that mind-body connection. Chant has real impact on our physical well being as the Benedictine monks earlier found out. It has the ability to impact consciousness. Chanting supports insight as the mind relaxes its grip. It opens our hearts and lifts our spirits. Webster's Dictionary says that "*healing is to make sound*". I love the double meanings here!

Chanting creates sacred space. Someone said that our voice is a cathedral! When we sing, we listen, both to ourselves and to others. I am reminded of one form of the Homages that says

*I take refuge in the Sangha, wishing that all sentient beings
shall be able to live in harmony,
as well as harmonized the general multitude,
without any obstruction whatsoever,
and that all shall respect the sacred Sangha.*

Chanting also allows for what Ajahn Amaro, in his book **Inner Listening** calls "*the sound of silence*" or "*the nada sound*". I find it interesting that *Nada* is the Sanskrit word for "**sound**" as well as being the Spanish word for "**nothing**". Music without rests or pauses simply becomes noise.

And at the same time chanting embraces activity and engagement. We sing with the paramita of Vigor. Conversely, we can use singing to strengthen Vigor within ourselves when we feel we're lacking it! We sing not only with the mind of meditation but with the body of meditation. We engage with the music, AND we engage with the surrounding Sangha - the "choir of daily life". I'll never forget the moment on the day after I'd entered the monastic community as a postulant when I stood with the community - in the midst of monks - for the first time for Morning Service. The chanting was an altogether different experience, a far cry from "sitting on the sidelines". I was present in the sound. I participated in each breath in a very different way. That experience affirmed my intention "*...to be able to live in harmony.*"

When we chant, we change our relationship to the scriptures or litanies that we sing. We experience the words of an invocation in a different way when we sing them. Our thinking process shifts as we breathe the musical line of the scriptures. Our breathing changes - deepens - as we repeat a mantra over and over again.

The word *mantra* originally meant *sacred sounds that communicate through vibration to inspire and open the heart rather than the mind*. Sacred sounds, Buddhist “music” indeed does that very thing. Our fundamental practice is the harmonization of body and mind. This might be said to be one “goal” of the practice of chanting. Indeed, those of you who know the Benedictine tradition will recognize this as being quite in line with St. Benedict’s Rule that says “...*let us sing in such a way that our minds are in harmony with our voices.*”

Kusala Bhikkhu, a long-time friend of the Abbey says that “...*Zen pretty much comes down to three things: everything changes, everything is connected, and pay attention.*” I’d like to make the case that chanting seems to lead us to the same conclusion. Music is constantly moving; it’s inherently connective; and requires breath-by-breath attention. Even the “rests” in our singing are energized.

So the practice of chanting provides a significant support of our meditation practice. How would I compare meditation and chanting? One definition of chant is “sung speech”, as I’ve said before. But may I suggest that chant is also “audible meditation”. In meditation and chanting, breath is deeply significant. In both we have the opportunity to let go of “mistakes” or judgments. Both meditation and chanting reinforce our connection with others when we sit or when we sing together. Both engage the whole body - sitting up straight - or standing or lying down, with feet firmly on the ground, breathing deeply and from the hara. Both chanting and meditating are offerings, neither is a performance. Both are done “*without strings*”. As Rev. Master Jiyu says in *Music Is Zen*, both music and singing teach us there are no mistakes, only opportunities to learn and to do what needs to be done.

Chanting is often a means of preparing the mind for meditation, as well as for carrying that meditation practice into the rest of our daily lives. Whether a lay person or a monk, chanting allows us to bring to mind the teachings of the Buddha or to offer praise or to reflect on and remember aspects of the teaching or of the Bodhisattvas. Chanting is a means of expressing gratitude. It is a means both of being present AND of actively participating in the mind of meditation.

Chant is a way to get a community to breathe together. No wonder those Benedictines saw a decrease in bickering once they started singing again. St. Benedict said you can tell much about a community by the way it sings. Think of the “chants of identity” at a baseball game - an energized crowd is often considered to be “the Tenth Man” for the home team. Think about the “chants of protest” that have become all too frequent at recent Black Lives Matter marches.

To paraphrase Rev. Master Daishin Morgan in his article *The Role of Ceremonies*: “*As scriptures are sung or recited, one cannot ponder the meaning in the way one can when reflecting on them with the intellect... We do not necessarily come away from (chanting) having learned something. One lets go of being an observer and becomes a total participant.* This is what chanting teaches us in support of our practice - to let go of being an observer, to become a total participant.

Rev. Master Daishin Morgan also notes that “*No ceremony (or chanting! my paraphrase) is necessary and no one’s enlightenment depends upon a ceremony (or chanting! my paraphrase), but as we go deeper in training there is less and less distinction between ceremonies (or chanting! my paraphrase) and any other aspect of life. Ceremonies (or chanting! my paraphrase) may start out as a form that points to awakening, but gradually we come to realize the nature of practice that never ceases and is no longer practice at all. Enlightenment really is in this moment, and life is its expression.*”

Let me read that again: “*No chanting is necessary and no one’s enlightenment depends upon chanting, but as we go deeper in training there is less and less distinction between chanting and any other aspect of life. Chanting may start out as a form that points to awakening, but gradually we come to realize the nature of practice that never ceases and is no longer practice at all. Enlightenment really is in this moment, and life is its expression.*”

The teachings of the Buddha mention music on many occasions. The Buddha, in fact, made use of *the simile of the lute* in his teaching on right effort. In music, as in life, nothing should ever be in excess. Music keeps the right beat, neither too fast nor too slow, following the breath, keeping the right measure. We do exactly the same when we meditate or when we practice with the mind of meditation. Our practice is the practice of the Middle Way, as Dogen describes it, “*...the correct ordering of daily life.*”

In the Amitabha Sutra, it is written that heavenly singing and chanting there is heard all day and all night as mandara flowers rain down from the heavens. And on hearing these melodies, those present naturally become mindful of the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. In accordance, it says, all Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are very skilled in utilizing music to spread the Dharma and to guide sentient beings to enlightenment.

Sutras sung as hymns and other songs praising the virtues of the Buddhas have attracted and helped purify the hearts of countless disciples. The Buddha's *Teaching on the Perfection of Great Wisdom* says "In order to build a pure land, the bodhisattvas make use of beautiful music to soften people's hearts. With their hearts softened, people's minds are more receptive, and thus easier to educate and transform through the teachings. For this reason, music has been established as one type of ceremonial offering to be made to the Buddha." The Mahavairochana Sutra says "in all acts of singing there is truth; every dance portrays reality."

So yes! may we be profoundly grateful to Rev. Master Jiyu! Chanting truly supports our practice. The words of our scriptures, invocations, songs, mantras - all offer rich teaching. And there is also something beyond discriminative thought in the music that underlies them. And that combination of music and words together serve as a doorway to that "...deepest Wisdom of the heart that is beyond discriminative thought...".

May we choose to go through that doorway.

In the coming week, perhaps you might pick one scripture, or an invocation, or a mantra and make a commitment to sing it out loud each day.

Or perhaps you might sing your practice in a way that resonates with you and make a commitment to do it daily.

What impact does this have on your practice? How does it support your practice?

*I offer the merit of this Dharma Talk for the benefit of all beings,
known and unknown, in need of merit.
Homage to the Buddha. Homage to the Dharma. Homage to the Sangha.*