



10,000 Buddhas Repentance

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The Lowdown on Bowing and Repentance Practice

Reverend Heng Sure, Ph. D., of Berkeley Buddhist Monastery shares his insight on bowing and repentance practice from the Buddhist tradition

Interviewed by Loc Huynh

Since the third century CE to this day, bowing to the Buddha is the most common practice for Asian Buddhists. However, among Westerners, bowing practice, as compared with meditation, is not as well-known. Last summer, I had an opportunity to speak with Reverend Heng Sure, the director of the Berkeley Buddhist Monastery, and asked for more information about Buddhist bowing and repentance. In the late 1970s, Reverend Sure and a fellow monk did a three-year bowing pilgrimage for world peace along the coast of California. Their journey began in Pasadena and ended three years and 800 miles later at the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas in Ukiah. And most astonishingly, their knees had already endured over a million bows....

Loc: Would you describe the purpose and benefits of a bowing practice?

Rev. Sure: Bowing, like other Dharma practices, can be considered a technology. It's actually a method for changing one's consciousness. And because it's a Dharma practice, it works by using the body. It is true that Buddhism emphasizes the mind; however, we often use the body to get to the mind. A renowned Chinese monk from the Tang dynasty, Master Cheng Guan, explained that bowing reduces pride, teaches us respect, and increases our goodness. Bowing awakens these qualities within, effecting our conscious state and view of ourselves and place in the world. The technology of bowing, from his ancient description, is precise. He considers bowing as a medicine, an antidote for pride. It also teaches respect because when we bow, we are physically down on the ground and potentially allows a feeling of reverence to emerge in our heart. Bowing increases goodness because the "self" shrinks. Things that we do with a reduced sense of self, and we're not talking about low self esteem, but things we do without the big "ME" in the middle, tend to turn out better. Bowing is the first of the ten practices recommended by Samantabhadra (Universal Worthy) Bodhisattva, one of the four revered bodhisattvas of Mahayana Buddhism. Bowing is a foundational practice, along with generosity, and ethics, for preparing someone for a spiritual life.

Loc: Buddhism does emphasize reducing arrogance and pride.

Rev. Sure: Bodhisattvas in the Buddhist sutras, no matter how high their position, all still bow to the Buddha. That



“Bowing...is actually a method for changing one's consciousness.”

is, everyone up to the stage of buddhahood still make bows. In America our cowboy culture gave us the “self-made man,” the independent individual, who says, “I don't kowtow to no man.” That can become, “We don't listen to no country, we don't need no allies, etc.” The developed world has machines that tromp over the earth and other species. We consume and cut down forest, dig up minerals, and somehow feel it's our given right to kill other creatures and eat their bodies. Those unwise attitudes result from an inability to humble the self and live in harmony as part of a larger community of living creatures on the planet. The flipside of pride and arrogance is isolationism and loneliness; we do not feel at home wherever we go. Hence, as a culture, we can definitely use a method that can ease this sense of loneliness.

Loc: Did bowing for three years on the California highway deepen the connection you have with people along the way?

Rev. Sure: The longer I bowed the more connected I felt. With each bow I gradually saw a certain sameness in people's faces; I felt a kinship with the people I met. I stopped feeling separateness and, with that change in my perception, people's responses to me changed too. I saw that underneath the exterior, there is a profound family relationship shared among people, animals, and living things. The first pictures of the planet earth taken from space showed a tiny blue marble in an inky black universe that stretches on forever and forever. Looking at those photos we realized that all creatures are like people in a lifeboat together. We share the water, temperature, and climate. We are a family; some in furs some with horns; some have wings and scales. Our skins are different colors and our mouths speak different languages, but we all share the same elemental makeup of earth, air, fire, and water.

Bowing shows you this organically. With each bow, the self slowly disappears. In the future I hope to keep bowing to “finish the job.” Most of us don't think to bow; it's so slow and boring. People often asked, “What are you gonna get out of that?” Kids get bowing right away. It feels good to bow. Adults often take longer to try it out. For adults, if they can get through the first couple bows, often it feels so good to lower the head; it feels as nourishing to the spirit as water on dry plants—it's very healing.

Loc: I have some friends who just got back from a three-week bowing repentance session at the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas. Can you tell us more about this event?

Rev. Sure: Every spring the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas (CTTB), convenes a three-week bowing session, called the Ten Thousand Buddhas Jeweled Repentance. During this event at CTTB, we bow to the names of 11,111 buddhas. This Dharma practice is based on the sutra *The Buddha Speaks the Sutra of the Buddhas' Names*.

Bowing together in ritual movement with 600 people, moving to music for eight hours a day creates a powerful catharsis. Those who have tried this ceremony know that the first day, you can think you're going to die from so much bowing. The ego really resists being lowered so much. On the second day, you don't doubt it, you know you're dead. On the third day, metaphorically speaking, we really die, the ego has given up and gotten with the program. But after the fourth day, we're reborn, so to speak and bowing becomes effortless from that time on.

Loc: What kind of effects does bowing in repentance have on the body and mind?

Rev. Sure: Bowing a repentance liturgy is designed to bring to consciousness the negative things that we may have committed in the past. Bowing changes the blood flow to the upper body, particularly to the brain, and it seems to dislodge memories or thoughts that may be buried in the mind, or in our kinetic memory. Seated meditation doesn't function the same way because sitting is stationary and our blood circulation slows down. When we bow, we place the head on the same level with heart. The flowing blood and changing energy stimulates and washes clean the effects in the psyche of deeds we have done with our body, mouth, and mind. While bowing, memories and thoughts of all kinds come to mind, thoughts that may be terrifying and embarrassing. They arise because the act of bowing relaxes the muscles from the shoulders, the small of your back, and the chest; it exercises the stomach muscles and the diaphragm, which also hold muscle memory. Attitudes and buried or repressed thoughts we can no longer "stomach" naturally return to awareness up during bowing.

Loc: What prevents your bowing from just becoming

purely mechanical?

Rev. Sure: If we are bowing in repentance, we can use a verse from the *Avatamsaka Sutra*:

"For all past bad karma,
Created by beginningless, greed, anger, and delusion,
And created by my body, mouth, and mind,
I now repent and reform entirely."

Each bow helps us confront and let go of memories. The power of this technology comes from a combination of physical, psychological, and spiritual elements. Essentially the repentance allows us to say "Yes, I made a mistake and, yes I won't do it again, I'm sorry." When negative memories arise, and are repented of, they lose their power to block our consciousness and impede our moving on to healthy spiritual growth. Venerable Master Hua described the process as, "Big disasters becomes smaller disasters; small ones disappear."

Bowing without an attitude of sincere repentance will not be as effective; bowing with sincerity helps clean up our stuff inside. The Buddhas and Bodhisattvas taught the Dharma to help people like us to leave suffering behind and ultimately, to go freedom from birth and death. The method of repentance helps us change and transform our minds.

**"Everyone up to the
stage of buddhahood
bows."**

Loc: How does the doctrine of "emptiness" apply to repentance?

Rev. Sure: The self works like a hinge pin on the structure of karma. If the view of self is gone, then there is no place for offenses to land or to stick. By emptying out the self with each bow, and here I'm using empty out as a verb, "to empty out," gradually we can actually change the outlook of the Self, the big "me" in the center. If the thing that does good and bad deeds is not entirely in charge, if the agent that does deeds is gone, and ultimately doesn't exist, then how much the less do the offenses themselves exist? And if we can then repent of the mistakes we have made, then slowly we turn the balance sheet around. Offenses are reduced, merit and virtue increases.

If we are determined to change and become like the Buddha, and want to transform afflictions and change the direction of our life, then repentance and bowing are good methods to do so. Bowing is slow and dull but it

works to clean the mind's closets.

Loc: How can people new to Buddhism or people who cannot attend long retreats apply the Dharma of repentance?

Rev. Sure: When I was a student, I was uninterested in reflecting on what I was doing. As a student I wanted experience—the more action the better. And when things happened to me I was unlikely to say to myself, “Oh that bang on the head was the result of something I did.” My attitude was, “Ouch! Darn! Bad luck!” Then I’d take an aspirin or drink the pain into oblivion.

I didn’t have a clue that I might benefit by reflecting and changing my behavior. It’s not easy to take that first step: to listen to myself and think things over.

But when we start to practice, and if we get some instruction in the principle of cause and effect, we can understand that things that happen to us are repercussions set in motion by our own behavior. What happens to us is the harvest of seeds we planted.

The next step is to learn how to move from passive understanding to conscious control. Upon reflection we make sense of behavior by comparing with a standard. The Dharma teaches about the Ten Evil and Ten Good Deeds, a set of ethical standards; the Ten Evil Deeds guide us to refrain from creating unwholesome karma with the:

Body— Three mistakes with the body include killing, stealing, and sexual misconduct. Instead of killing, the Ten Good Deeds exhort us to be kind to all creatures. Instead of stealing, we are guided to be generous and to appreciate what we have. Instead of sexual misconduct, we are encouraged to be true to our commitments in our relationship and to cherish our body and energy. The world’s major religious traditions are unanimous in teaching that irresponsible sexual behavior leads to emotional confusion and heartbreak. Further, careless emotional entanglements make it difficult to find stillness in the mind.

Speech— There are four evil deeds done with the mouth, so the Dharma guides us to refrain from lying, gossiping or schism-making, harsh, and frivolous speech.

Mind— As for the mind, there are three evils: greed, hatred, and delusion. Delusions refer to false views—seeing things the way they aren’t, and believing things

that are not based in reality.

The Ten Good Deeds are a Dharma standard by which we can judge our behavior. If we observe and reflect our conduct in harmony with their guidance, our actions will yield positive results and we will harvest a life that we want to live.

Loc: And when we make a mistake?

Rev. Sure: When we make a mistake, the first step is again, to see cause and effect at work, to understand that we are creating the world we’re moving into. Secondly, reflect and catch ourselves in our habitual, unmindful and unskillful actions; and third, from understanding and seeing our actions, we become empowered to take action and change. We then resolve to change our negative behavior to the positive and in this way, to benefit the world. At this point, we will be on the spiritual path and will be using our life unselfishly. Our journey will lead us to meet with wholesome friends and good things will arise out of that community.



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