



## NOTES ON GASSHO AND BOWING

by Maezumi Roshi

Visitors to the Zen Center often ask about the gassho and about bowing. What, they inquire, is the meaning of these gestures? Why are they done? And why is it necessary to do them so precisely and uniformly? These questions deserve careful consideration.

Although we are Zen Buddhists, it should be noted that the gassho and the bow are common to all sects of Buddhism, both Mahayana and Theravada. These two gestures date from the earliest days of Buddhism, or even earlier than that, and they have moved from India throughout the Orient, finally arriving recently in the Western world.

When Shakyamuni Buddha's enlightenment occurred, he went to see five of his former comrades with whom he had practiced various austerities and spiritual disciplines prior to his enlightenment. These five men, who were very devout monks, felt that their companion had gone astray when he abandoned their customary practices. "Come," they said to each other, "Let's not pay any attention to poor Gautama, he no longer is one of us." They were dismayed to find that he had seemingly stopped his spiritual practices, going so far as to even drink milk and take a bath (two forbidden acts according to their tradition). They could not understand why he seemed only to sit quietly, doing nothing of any value.

But when the Buddha approached them, it is reported that these five monks were so struck by the transformation of their former friend, by his serenity and the radiance of his personality, that they spontaneously placed their palms together and greeted him with deep bows. Perhaps it is a little misleading to say that they greeted him. More accurately, it should be said that they were bowing, not to their old friend Gautama, but rather to the Buddha – the Enlightened One.

What the Buddha had experienced was the Supreme Great Enlightenment (in Sanskrit, anuttara samyak sambodhi): the direct and conscious realization of the oneness of the whole universe, and of his own unity with all things. This is what

enlightenment means. This very realization is actually in itself the act of being the Buddha. And it was to this enlightened state that the five monks bowed.

When the Buddha was enlightened, the first thing he said was: “Wonder of wonders! All sentient beings have this same (enlightened) nature!” What this implies is that in bowing to the Buddha, the monks were actually bowing to themselves, and to all beings. These monks were recognizing the great unity which their former companion had directly and profoundly experienced.

Let us examine the gassho and the bow more closely.

## GASSHO

The word gassho literally means “to place the two palms together.” Of all the mudras (symbolic hand gestures or positions) we use, it is perhaps the most fundamental, for it arises directly from the depths of enlightenment. Its uses are many, but most commonly it is employed to express respect, to prevent scattering of the mind, to unify all polarities (such as left and right, passive and dominant, etc.) and to express the One Mind – the total unity of Being.

Although there are many types of gassho, in the Soto sect we are primarily concerned with these two:

The Firm Gassho. The most formal of the gasshos, this is the one most commonly used in our daily practice. It is the gassho we use upon entering the zendo, and upon taking our seats. We also use it at least 16 times in the course of a formal meal, and during all services. It is made by placing the hands together, palm to palm in front of the face. The fingers are placed together, and are straight rather than bent, while the palms are slightly pressed together so that they meet. The elbows are held somewhat out from the body, although the forearms are not quite parallel with the floor. There is about one fist’s distance between the tip of the nose and the hands. Fingertips are at about the same height from the floor as the tip of the nose. This gassho has the effect of helping to establish an alert and reverential state of mind.

The Gassho of No-Mind. This is the next most commonly used gassho. It is basically used in greeting one another or our teachers. In this position, the hands are held a little more loosely together, with a slight space between the palms, although the fingers still touch. The elevation of the elbows from the floor is not so great as in the Firm Gassho; forearms should be at approximately a 45-degree angle to the floor. This gassho has the effect of deepening one’s state of samadhi.

In each of these gasshos, we keep the eyes focused upon the tips of our middle fingers. But regardless of the style or variety of the gassho, and in whatever setting it is used, the fundamental point of the gassho is to be one with the Three Treasures: Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha.

Of course, we can look at the Three Treasures from many perspectives, and with varying degrees of depth and clarity. At perhaps the most superficial level, the Three Treasures are seen as external objects of supreme reverence for all Buddhists. Unfortunately, in this view, the Three Treasures tend to be perceived as something other than oneself. But as our vision opens up, we experience that each of us is, in fact, the Buddha. We see clearly that everything we encounter in the world is none other than the Dharma – the functioning of underlying enlightenment. And, realizing the oneness of all beings, we come to realize that the Sangha – the all-embracing brotherhood of practice – is simply all composite things, including each of us. Having this awareness we become – or rather, we are – one with the Three Treasures.

So, joining our hands palm to palm, we simultaneously create and express the absolute, the oneness which goes beyond all dichotomies. It is from this perspective that we make the gassho, and that we bow.

It is no ordinary person who bows; it is the Three Treasures recognizing itself in all things. If anyone thinks of himself as “just ordinary,” he is, in effect, defaming the Three Treasures. And as we place our palms together we unite wisdom and samadhi, knowledge and truth, enlightenment and delusion.

## BOWING

Dogen Zenji once said: “As long as there is true bowing, the Buddha Way will not deteriorate.” In bowing, we totally pay respect to the all-pervading virtue of wisdom, which is the Buddha.

In making the bow, we should move neither hastily nor sluggishly but simply maintain a reverent mind and humble attitude. When we bow too fast, the bow is then too casual a thing; perhaps we are even hurrying to get it over and done with. This is frequently the result of a lack of reverence.

On the other hand, if our bow is too slow, then it becomes a rather pompous display; we may have gotten too attached to the feeling of bowing, or our own (real or imagined) gracefulness of movement. This is to have lost the humble attitude which a true bow requires.

When we bow, it is always accompanied by gassho, although the gassho itself may not always be accompanied by bowing. As with the gassho, there are numerous varieties and

styles of bowing, but here we will deal only with the two main kinds of bow which we use in our daily practice.

The Standing Bow. This bow is used upon entering the zendo, and in greeting one another and our teachers. The body is erect, with the weight distributed evenly and the feet parallel to each other. The appropriate gassho is made (see above). As the bow is made, the body bends at the waist, so that the torso forms an angle with the legs of approximately 45 degrees. The hands (in gassho) do not move relative to the face, but remain in position and move only with the whole body.

The Deep Bow (Full Prostration). This bow is most often used at the beginning and end of services, and upon entering and leaving dokusan. It is somewhat more formal than the standing bow, and requires a continuous concentration during its execution so that it is not sloppily done.

The bow itself begins in the same way as the standing bow, but once the body is bent slightly from the waist, the knees bend and one assumes a kneeling position. From the kneeling position, the movement of the torso continues, with the hands separating and moving, palms upward, into a position parallel with the forehead. As the bowing movement progresses, the backs of the hands come to rest just above the floor and the forehead is lowered until it rests upon the floor between the hands. At this point, the body is touching the floor at knees, elbows, hands, and forehead. The hands are then slowly raised, palms upward, to a point just above the ears. Then the hands slowly return to the floor. This action is a symbolic placing of the Buddha's feet above one's head as an act of reverence and humility. There should be no sharp, abrupt movements of the hands or arms, no bending of the wrists or curling of the fingers while executing this gesture. When the hands have been raised and lowered, the body then straightens as the person bowing gets to his feet once again and ends in gassho, just as he began. In kneeling, actually the knees do not touch the ground simultaneously, but in sequence; first, the right and then the left knee touches the ground. The same is true for the right and left hands and right and left elbows, in that sequence. In practice, however, the interval between right and left sides touching the ground may be so minute as to be unnoticeable. In bowing, movement should not be jerky or disjointed, but should flow smoothly and continuously without either disruption or arrested motion.

Master Obaku, the teacher of Master Rinzai, was famous for his frequent admonition to his students, "Don't expect anything from the Three Treasures." Time after time he was heard to say this. One day, however, Master Obaku was observed in the act of bowing, and was challenged about his practice.

"You always tell your students not to expect anything from the Three Treasures," said his questioner, "and yet you have been making deep bows." In fact, he had been bowing so frequently for so long that a large callus had formed on his forehead at the point where it

touched the hard floor. When asked how he explained this, Master Obaku replied, “I don’t expect. I just bow.”

This is the state of being one with the Three Treasures. Let us just make gassho. Let us just bow.