6 Notes on the Liturgy

Notes on the Sutra Service

Joan Sutherland & John Tarrant

Introduction

This sutra service is like a deep pool collecting all the streams of our tradition. The Ti-Sarana comes from the Theravada, the Way of the Elders, the earliest Buddhism. The Heart Sutra comes from the foundations of the Mahayana, as Buddhism moved into China. Japanese Zen is represented by Hakuin and Torei. The dedications are contemporary, written in English by John Tarrant and Joan Sutherland. In a trans-cultural tour de force, we chant the Sho Sai Myo in our American-inflected pronunciation of the Japanese readings of Chinese characters that were themselves a transliteration of the original Sanskrit. Rich Domingue, a Cajun musician, gave many of the chants musical settings that include the European waltz and the blues, one of the great indigenous American traditions, with its roots in Africa. Buddha nature pervades the universe.

Purification

To enter a ceremony in virtually any tradition, there's a purification, a confession, a casting away of the accumulated delusions that cause us to suffer. The purification announces our readiness for the sacred to appear, declaring something along the lines of: Well I know I'm not perfect, and here I am; I choose this, my own flawed life, since it is what I have to work with. What could be more perfect than the blues to express this? I place my ancient twisted karma on the altar in order to enter the world where Antonio Machado dreamed that "the golden bees/were making white combs/and sweet honey/from my old failures."

Refuge : Ti-Sarana

In taking refuge, we say that, once our hearts are opened by the purification, there is a way for us to follow, and that way will sustain us. In the Buddhist tradition we name the elements of that way as awakening itself; the teachings and ways of meditation; and the companionship that holds our practice. Together these make a harbor. We sing the chant in the ancient Pali, the original language of Buddhism, in honor of our source tradition; the waltz setting evokes the sweetness of refuge to western ears.

Testament of Faith : The Heart Sutra

Then there's a necessary statement of faith and knowledge. In Judaism we have the Shema, and in the Catholic church the Credo; in Zen it's the Heart Sutra. This is our description of reality from the point of view of meditation; it only makes sense if you enter sacred time and space, and so it encourages meditation, but it also encourages the arts of life, since it says that the world of flesh and blood is exactly the world of spirit and eternity. We chant the Heart Sutra in English because it is a statement of what we most deeply believe, which is not something you want to do in a language most of us don't understand.

Warding Off Misfortune : The Sho Sai Myo

Next we have a dharani, or spell, to ward off misfortune, a shamanic chant that brings in something from the ancient layers of the psyche. This is the most plainly irrational moment in a Zen service. It can't be translated because it is the pattern of sounds that's important, not the meaning. And even there we're deep in the realm of the unknowable, because what we chant are our western pronunciations of a Japanese transliteration of the Chinese, which itself was a transliteration of the Sanskrit. This chant evokes the power of meditation to protect us and lay down a path through the dark.

The Dedications

We have two dedications in the service; the first is in gratitude to our ancestors, and the second is a remembrance of those who are suffering, have died, or are not yet born. A dedication offers the accumulated power of our meditation to others. A dedication is an act of magic, a transfer of energy from here to there, or everywhere. We receive something from meditating together and we want to keep the gift circulating.

The First Dedication : Gratitude

We call down the ancestors into the middle of our lives, assuming that they want to be near and aid us, acknowledging that they depend on us and we on them. And we thank them. Ancestors might be those who taught us the meditation path, but all those who bent towards us to ease our way count–-an aunt, a third-grade teacher, a sympathetic boss. These are our benefactors and mentors. There is also the tree with whom we have communion, the mountain that suddenly begins to dance, and the earth, which is itself alive and our greatest benefactor.

How To : The Song of Meditation

Our chant of Hakuin Ekaku's Praise Song for Meditation is another testament of faith, as well as a description of the method—meditation, meditation, meditation. If the Heart Sutra lays out the promise of meditation, Hakuin's Song reminds us of what it looks and feels like in our own lives to be coming into relationship with that promise. It is the joyful embodiment of the shining Mind revealed in the Heart Sutra.

When It's Hard : Bodhisattva's Vow

We include Torei's Bodhisattva's Vow because it's the one place in the traditional liturgy that acknowledges that our relations with each other are sometimes a mess. It allows us to be honest about that, and it offers a method for dealing with the shadows when they appear. It reminds us that the wisdom path endures, and that the mess itself can be a gate into that path. Although it can strike us as sentimental, it's one of the few places where the path of surrender and love is celebrated.

Asking for Help : The Guanyin Chant

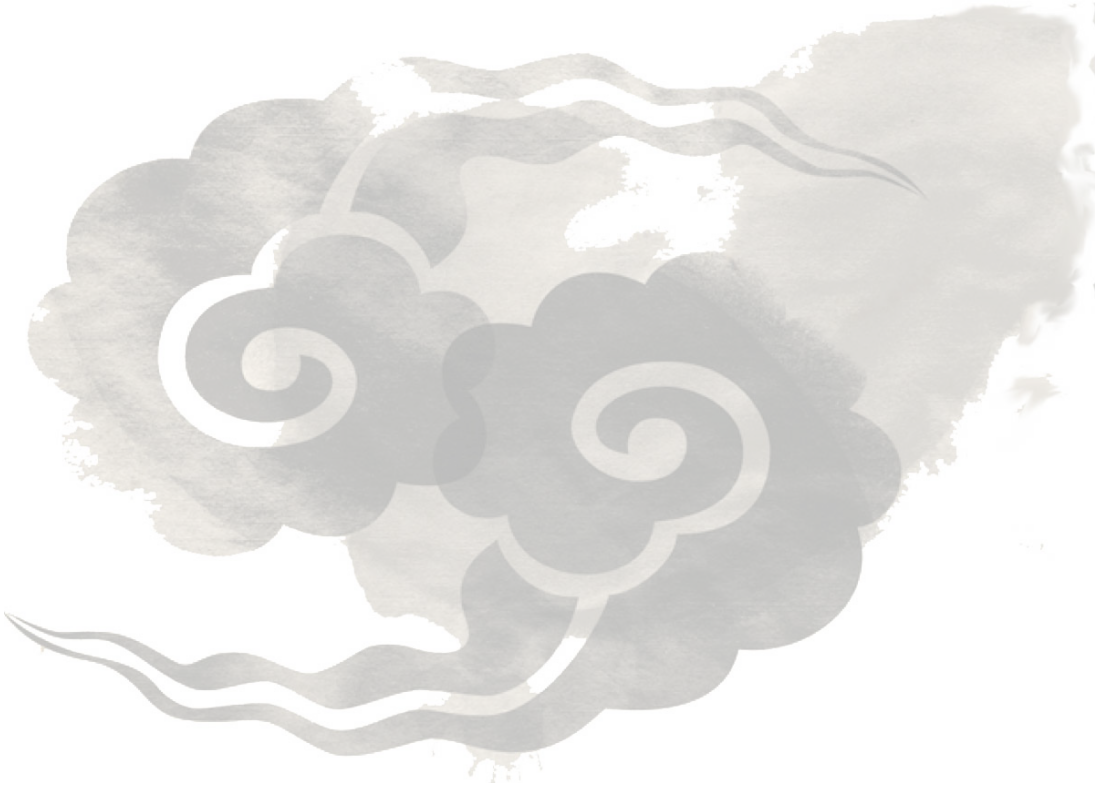
The Guanyin Sutra of Endless Life is the nearest we come in the service to an outright prayer. As the feminine embodiment of compassion, Guanyin holds a place similar to Mary's in Catholicism, and in this chant we ask for her blessing and acknowledge our desire for her help. This is the chant we sing to welcome the newborn and ease the dying on their way. Rich Domingue's musical setting of this chant captures the sense of open-ended yearning that a Zen prayer might be: We simply ask, for ourselves and for others, and the asking is enough.

In Memoriam : Remembrance

The second dedication has traditionally been a remembrance of those who are gone. Here we acknowledge that we are mortal, and those we love disappear. We have expanded the sense of remembrance to include people who are ill, suffering, at war—in other kinds of difficulty—so that we have the opportunity to offer our meditation for them as well. It's tremendously important that we not sit separate from the world, but that we sit *in* the world, and that everything that's going on right now is here with us. When we bring this awareness into a retreat, the retreat changes. The perspective opens up a bit and we tend to break open our own story to include the stories of others. A greater kindness, a deeper sense of gratitude, is in the air.

The Final Blessing : The Four Vows

The service ends with the Four Boundless Vows, which lead us back into the world. The vows are full of impossibility and beauty. You can't actually get from ignorance to wisdom, and yet we do it every day; you try again and again without success, and then suddenly you're through the gate. Life rests on a mystery that is nearer than our opinions about that mystery. The mystery itself will bless and sustain us, and we will find ourselves able to extend its beauty to others.



Notes on the Afternoon Readings

Joan Sutherland

"When you let these words in, you encounter the ancestors;
don't limit yourself to your own small story."

Shitou Xiqian

The afternoon reading is where we let the voices of the ancestors in, as has been the tradition since earliest times. As the retreat goes on and our work intensifies, their words can help sustain us, and we can lean on them when we grow weary. When, in our meditation, we touch the mystery at the heart of things, the ancestors provide us with ways to express the inexpressible. It's lovely when some ancestral phrase rises spontaneously in our mind as a description of what we're experiencing now: *This* is what they meant! The ancestors speak to us, and we speak back to them.

A cherished bit of Zen mythology is that Zen is a special transmission not dependent on words and texts, so it's good to look at the place of literature in our tradition. China inherited Indian Buddhism largely in the form of a massive body of texts that needed to be translated and interpreted. Because the texts were so important, they became numinous and revered objects themselves, and it became a meritorious deed just to recite them, whether you understood them or not. These *approaches* to reading—the exclusively scholarly and the religious—were what the Chinese teachers were warning about, not reading itself. For them, reading was a way to look through the text and to directly experience the reality the text described, right here and now. In other words, you're not studying texts, you're studying reality by means of texts, and the hope is that by studying it in this way, you'll actually realize it.

One old Chinese teacher, Huangbo, called this practice 'wise eating': taking the texts in, digesting them, and making them part of your life now. The digestion part is crucial; if you just accumulate words, you'll get indigestion, while if you avoid them entirely, you'll suffer from malnutrition.

Chan people had quite a postmodern sense of what 'reading' is : they read facial expressions and gestures, landscapes, situations, and historical circumstances as well as books. They called the world a text, and reality itself was the Great Sutra. Can you bring the same warm curiosity to a walk in the woods on your afternoon break and a stanza of Rilke's poetry? What happens when a line of thousand-year old poetry penetrates you in the same way that a crow's call or the clatter of pots from the kitchen can?

In the afternoon reading we include work from both East and West, ancient and modern. This is because great Zen texts are everywhere—in words and paintings and views from mountain paths and sidewalk cafés. In the faces of people we love, and people we don't. And every afternoon, in a few minutes of reading.

Notes on the Meal Service

Joan Sutherland

We have two kinds of meal services, a simple one for eating western-style at tables, and a traditional formal meal service that is done in the meditation hall with bowl sets.

Simple Meal Service

This is a blending of traditional Zen forms and Western customs. The first grace is a Jesuit prayer, introduced by Tyrone Cashman. The food offering is traditional. The second grace was written by John Tarrant and Joan Sutherland. The alternate grace, "We honor the Three Treasures," is traditional.

Formal Meal Service

The formal meal service is based on tradition but was reworked by Joan Sutherland and John Tarrant in 2000. When the ambivalence of the traditional service towards the body and its needs was stripped away, a practice of generosity, of nourishing each other, and of appreciating the great beauty of food, fragrance, and taste was revealed.

In this vision, eating is not just what we do to make the real practice possible, or a break from it; it is an integral part of the Way. In a meditation retreat, we choose a fast of the eyes, ears, mouth, mind, and heart—a respite from habit and busyness. We work hard on our cushions, and so we get hungry, and with gratitude we eat. We begin to see the cycles of fasting, hunger, satiation, and fasting again. Rising and falling, just like everything else in the world, within our own bodies. We begin to see that things rise and fall in the body as they do in the mind, that our body changes just as our consciousness does, that our body is a vast territory, just as our mind is, and there is much to explore there.

Perhaps the guardian spirits of our meal service are those formidable ladies of Zen tradition, the proprietors of places of refreshment and nourishment along the pilgrim way. They ran teashops, roadside stands, spas, and inns. They were kind, but within that kindness was a bright blade. To encounter them was to meet the numinous hidden in the domestic, and to have your life changed. That's what a meal service can be, if we let it.

Notes on the End of Day Ceremony

Joan Sutherland

The end of day ceremony is the last thing we do together in the meditation hall each evening. There's a deliberate kindness to it, as we call on the Protectors to watch over each other in the night. We do a little scaring away of demons, too, with the brave clatter and thump of the time sequence performed by the Timekeeper and Teacher Liaison. Those drum beats count out the hour, and the temple bell indicates which twenty-minute segment of the hour we're in. So that 8:50 is indicated by eight drumbeats and three strikes on the bell, since it falls in the last third of the hour.

It's a way of marking the close of one kind of meditation—what we do while we're awake—and the beginning of the meditation we do while we're asleep. At this threshold from one state to another, the ancestors appear, speaking in the voice of the Teacher Liaison from outside the hall. As the ancestors are wont to do, they suggest by example, they cajole and urge. The ancestral words have changed over the years; even the ancient ones get sick of repeating themselves. For now we use poems by Anna Swir, Kabir, and Mirabai.

The evening readings remind us of what a profound meditation sleeping and dreaming can be. As with eating, sleep isn't just a break from meditating, or merely necessary so we can keep meditating. It too is part of the one seamless body of practice in a retreat, and the end of day ceremony is a way of beginning that long slow fall into the *rio abajo rio*, the river under the river, that reveals itself in the night.