

On Ceremonial Action

from Appreciate Your Life by Taizan Maezumi Roshi

IT IS INTERESTING TO REFLECT on how the most basic routines of our lives are conducted in an orderly way within a particular form. When our actions are conducted in this way, they become ceremony. What is ceremony?

The original implications of ceremony in Judeo-Christian culture reveal how we live and point to what is missing in our life now. In Latin, "ceremony" is caerimonia, which is related to cura, meaning "cure," the act of healing or of being healed. In other words, ceremony is an act that cures or heals, or by which something is healed. In having a ceremony or in doing ceremonial action, we must ask, what is healed? By what?

The word heal means to be healthy, to be whole and sound. To make our life healthy is ceremonial. In order to live a healthy life, we live ceremonially every day regardless of our culture, country, or race. From morning to night, we live our lives through rituals, don't we? We get up in the morning, wash our face, brush our teeth, and eat, going about these simple routines in an orderly way. When eating, we have the ritual of using a fork, knife, and plate. At work we act ceremonially when we greet our colleagues in a particular way.

From time to time, many of you express your discomfort with ritual. Most of us prefer informality or casualness. But regardless of whether something is formal or informal, still there is form. The definition of ceremony also includes the word law, the law's of life. From morning until night, our life is continuous ritual, governed by rules, regulations, and laws. Behaving informally, can we follow the laws or regulations that are essential to living a healthy life?

We can say that living an informal life is more comfortable for us. But in fact, something is ignored when we do even simple things without an understanding of ceremony. What are we ignoring? How do we take care of ourselves in each moment? When the time comes to get up in the morning, just get up. It is a seemingly simple thing, but how do you do it? By doing it in an orderly way, you regulate yourself and your life. When you do these actions casually, you miss something.

Is being informal really more comfortable? Some of you wear formal sitting clothes in the zendo and some dress rather informally. Certain informal clothing is permissible. I do not mind if you wear long pants and a long-sleeved shirt rather than a robe. But, for example, during the summer when it is hot, if you come to sit wearing short pants, you may think you will be comfortable, but this might not necessarily be the case. And vice versa; being overdressed would also be funny.

So following a particular form can cure us of our tendency to become too casual or disorderly and therefore unhealthy. In the zendo we should have a sense of being together. When you do certain things in your own way simply because you want to, this causes disharmony. Situations are regulated in a particular way. Ceremony means to follow that way! This is the best way to be healthy.

From time to time I have been emphasizing the importance of individual action. But I think that individual action and group action are the same. So ideally, ceremonial action should have the individual as the center of a group, of a sangha, of a country, of society or world. By taking care of things in a ceremonial way, we become unified. We come together as one, staying away from our own self-centered interests, do you see?

Who do you think creates the casual, disorderly way of life? I do. Our ego does. Ceremony can be understood as a form or discipline by which we avoid self-centeredness, which causes our difficulties. Self-centered living creates trouble not only for others but also for oneself. Usually we do not understand ceremony in this way, but the definition I am presenting here is actually based on your own Judeo-Christian tradition. In the wisdom of your own tradition and culture, you have inherited ceremony as a way to regulate your life.

Regarding healing, there are some interesting points to consider. For instance, sickness can be a symptom of disorderliness of the mind, emotion, psyche, body, whatever. In one way or another, we are all sick until we have become unified and live a balanced life. Of course, we can be physically ill and still live ceremonially, in some balance.

How do we keep ourselves in order? By examining our body and mind. We are ceremonial by balancing ourselves and externals. In order to harmonize yourself, regulate your life from morning to night. When we live in this so-called formal way, sickness or the unsound life is avoided. And when we do not, we create a troubled life.

We practice this Buddha Way, which is literally the laws or teachings of the Buddha. Dogen Zenji says, "To practice the Buddha Way is to study oneself. To study oneself is to forget the self." What happens when you forget the self? The Buddha Way is revealed as your own life. This is the purpose of ceremony. Dogen Zenji further says, "To forget the self is to be confirmed or to be enlightened by the ten thousand dharmas." To forget the self is to be enlightened by everything, the order and forms that we live by from morning to night. This is the enlightened life itself.

Bowing is an important act in the Buddhist tradition. In Zen the most respectful bow is the bow in which our knees, elbows, and head all touch the ground. In Tibet and India, some bows are done by literally lying flat on the ground. This signifies the complete absence of one's own ego or self—just complete obeisance to the laws that are the order of life. Bowing with absence of ego is the most polite bow. How can you unify yourself with Yourself as well as with anything, everything? This is bowing. This is the ceremonial action of forgetting the self and being enlightened by bowing.

The same thing could be said for brushing our teeth and washing our face. In Dogen Zenji's *Shobogenzo Senmen*, he writes about how to wash the face. Washing the face is nothing but the treasury of the true dharma eye itself. Washing the face is the unsurpassable Way. Dogen Zenji even writes about using the toilet and how to wipe your bottom. He explains all this in detail. It is somewhat extreme ceremonial action!

When we read about this kind of detailed ceremonial action, it seems almost ridiculous, but Dogen Zenji is serious. This is nothing but enlightened action. It is life itself. By being ceremonial, we can order ourselves. If we have even the slightest idea of like or dislike, of what I want, we simply cannot be ceremonial in this way. In other words, such ceremonial actions in themselves become a powerful medicine. Unfortunately, it is so powerful that not many people can follow it.

We practice zazen. When we truly do zazen, everything is taken care of. This is ceremony. When we carefully understand our life, every bit of our life becomes ceremonial action, very orderly, formal action. This action is not for the sake of formality but for a healthy, sound life. When we live this way, healing or being healed is unnecessary. The enlightened life is an orderly, ordinary life. We should take care to live this way. This is ceremony, do you see?