

SITTING WITH OTHERS - CHANTING THE GATHAS

The core of Zen practice is *zazen* – seated, silent daily meditation done at home. But many of us also find benefit in sitting with a group. It supports our practice with advice from more experienced practitioners and in turn we can support and encourage others. This is the meaning of *sangha* or a Zen community. When we sit together we do things slightly more formally and this gives communal meditation a sharper edge because we have to maintain a higher degree of awareness - of our own actions and those of others - for the sitting to run smoothly. One key element in group practice is **chanting**.

Breaking the normal silence of meditation with a chant is a celebration of our awareness of our connectedness with others. The saying in Zen is that you ‘chant with your ears’ as you try and create a harmonious sound together. Outside the full service which incorporates sutras which are used in Zen temples across the world every day (see the website for details of the Service), there are three short chants that we use in our group sittings.

Our morning sittings begin with the **Verse of Atonement**:

*All evil karma ever committed by me since of old
On account of my beginningless greed, anger and ignorance
Born of my body, mouth and thought
Now I atone for it all (x 3)*

This chant reminds us that we are always directly personally responsible for our thoughts, words and actions and the effects these have on others and the world around us (karma). We are only human and we all mess up sometimes and hurt others. The chant is a reminder of this and of our power to change and make amends to reduce harm and suffering.

We end the morning sitting with the **Verse of the Kesa** (kesa = a monk’s cloak):

*Vast is the robe of liberation
A formless field of benefaction
I wear the Tathagatha teaching (Tathagatha = Buddha)
Saving all sentient beings (x 3)*

Again this is about our connectedness with the world around us. The core of the Buddha’s teaching was about liberation from suffering and the promotion of compassion for ‘sentient beings’ which is ourselves and others. Here, this teaching is likened to a cloak which envelops us.

Our Saturday and evening sittings end with the chanting of the **Four (Boddhisatva) Vows**:

*Sentient beings are numberless, I vow to save them
Desires are inexhaustible, I vow to put an end to them
The Dharmas are boundless, I vow to master them! (Dharma = teaching, or daily life)
The Buddha Way is unsurpassable, I vow to attain it (x 3)*

This chant contains a series of contradictions: we know that we are attempting the impossible but we vow to practice to the best of our ability anyway; it is the *trying* not the *attainment* that matter.