

One Long, Endless Bow

By Seisen Hope Blosser

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The idea for this article was created while having dinner at a little Italian restaurant on Fifth Avenue in Park Slope, Brooklyn. Ian Case, a dedicated member of the Boundless Mind Zendo of Brooklyn, told me he wanted to focus the next issue of their quarterly newsletter, "Nothing Special," on the essential Buddhist teaching of taking refuge. We smiled at one another across the table, nodded and went back to perusing the menu. "I know!" I said a few moments later, "I'll write about bowing." Ian looked at me and nodded again, looking satisfied that I knew what I was talking about, and the conversation drifted elsewhere. Since that day in early fall, I've wondered whether my decision was a sound one or more a flight of fancy that should have been abandoned for more philosophical or esoteric topics. I've questioned whether one actually takes refuge in a bow or if I was way off base by suggesting it. Faced with the urgency of an upcoming deadline, it occurred to me that, before I could speak about bowing, I needed to define what it means to "take refuge" and decide for myself what that over-used expression actually means and what it looks like in our everyday lives.

When I think about what taking refuge means, various images come to mind. I think of a huge black umbrella being held up against a burgeoning sky, with many people clustered and comfortable underneath its slick canopy. A large welcoming bed also comes to mind, as well as a sturdy rowboat used to maneuver through the rough and tumble seas of our lives. The little these images have in common is an incomprehensible vastness, an all-encompassing nature that is so gentle and constant that all are welcomed and accepted lovingly. To me, taking refuge means being able to hand over the reins of your troubles to something or someone else, if only briefly, and that refuge can indeed be as simple as a calm smile, instead of a strained grimace. When our lives become so complicated and stressful, taking refuge can be as simple as a bow.

The first time I started considering bowing as a practice in taking refuge was a few years ago, when I attended a retreat at a little zendo in the Adams Morgan neighborhood of Washington, D.C. Michael Wenger – a veteran teacher from the San Francisco Zen Center – was visiting, and I enthusiastically took my place alongside all the other participants who had gathered that first morning in early fall, eager to hear whatever this man who'd come all the way from California had to

say. I remember little from that two-day sit other than the wooden floors shining warmly in the sun, the green plant greeting me in the bathroom each time I opened the door and Michael's towering form that was both exceedingly gentle and intense at the same time.

I also remember parts of Michael's dharma talk. "You should bow to everything," he told us, before explaining how this precept of sorts worked itself out in his own life. "I bow to the cat," he said, "and the plants. The dirty dishes ... everything." We all laughed in that slightly embarrassed way when a part of you is thinking, "hold on a minute – it can't be this simple, can it?" I looked around the zendo and wondered how many of us would have a hard time getting to our cars and bikes afterwards, choosing to bow to every green blade of grass and lazy caterpillar that might cross our path.

Since that time, I've returned to Michael's teaching over and over again. Bowing is one of the practices I find endless delight in, whether it be to my own cat, who waits patiently for my morning sits to be over before greeting me with a hearty meow, or to the teachers and practitioners I'm lucky enough to spend time with in New York and Washington, D.C. I work in a Quaker school, and sometimes find myself wanting to stand up and bow after a child or colleague has shared something truthful from his or her heart in our weekly Quaker meetings or in one of my middle school English classes.

This practice of bowing reminds me of another lesson I return to many times over. My long-time teacher once said, "you practice zazen with your body. Your mind just comes along for the ride!" With that advice in my ears, I focus on placing each finger side by side and holding them close to my chest so my lips and nose are just touching the tips of my fingers. When I bow deeply, I pay attention to the visceral sensations in my body, all the way down to my hamstrings. Whether I'm feeling particularly calm or wise at that time is not the point – the very act of placing my hands palm-to-palm creates a calming and rejuvenating effect. No matter how busy my little life becomes, I bow often and deeply. Sometimes I lose my balance while on my way back up, but I can always right myself again. It's a quick and easy way to connect the physical body and dancing mind in one gesture. If taking refuge is really this simple, why wouldn't we want to bow to everything we could?