

GASSHO WITH O-ENJU AND BOW

DHARMA ARCHIVE ENTRY #21

GASSHO

This is a gesture you will often see Buddhists do with their hands. Gassho means to place your palms together. The practice of gassho originated in India and is used to greet a person, but it means many things — “hello,” “goodbye,” “thank you” and it also expresses deep honour and respect. It was used at the time of Shakyamuni Buddha over 2,500 years ago. When we think of this history, we can appreciate and feel the weight of this tradition.

Gassho and bowing are common to all schools of Buddhism, although there are many different forms or ways of doing gassho depending on the tradition.

For a Jodo Shinshu Buddhist, it is one of the first things we learn, but also one of the most profound because gassho with Nembutsu is the highest expression of gratitude in Jodo Shinshu.

First, let's talk about how to gassho. Hands are placed at the mid-chest level, palms together, fingers straight and pointed at a 45-degree angle upwards [not upright against your chest]. The wrists should be close to the chest and in a relaxed posture.

When we gassho, it is symbolic of the Dharma, the truth about life.

What I mean by that is when we place together our right and left hand, it is symbolic of putting together opposites — you and me, light and dark, life and death, ignorance and wisdom.

Our left hand represents our human realm filled with our self-centered attachments. Our right hand represents the world of awakening or enlightenment. When we put our hands together, we are saying they are not separate but really one.

NENJU

We also place a nenju around both hands when we gassho.

The nenju represents the Dharma or the Buddha's teachings. So when we gassho, we realize that through the Buddha's teachings, we can see that these opposites are really one. Amida Buddha and I are one — non-dual.

When we gassho, we are engaging both our body and mind in awareness. It is not just an intellectual exercise. As a result, it can be transforming.

Gassho symbolizes respect, the Buddhist teachings, and the Dharma. But it also is an expression of our feelings of gratitude and our connection with each other. It symbolizes the realization that our lives are supported by all others.

NAMU AMIDA BUTSU (The Nembutsu)

When we gassho, we also say “Namo Amida Butsu.” We say it often. What is “Namo Amida Butsu”? We are not asking or praying for something. It is the name and title of Amida Buddha.

There are different ways to explain “Namo Amida Butsu,” but one way to think about it is that “Namo” means to bow down or to be humble, to let go of your self-centered thinking. “Amida Butsu” is Amida Buddha like this statue on the Naijin. But Amida Buddha is not a being or a deity who controls our lives or punishes us. It is sometimes seen as a statue to give us a form to try to understand what it means. One way we can think about Amida Buddha is infinite wisdom and compassion, or the truth of enlightenment.

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So when we put our hands together in gassho with our nenju and recite “Namo Amida Butsu,” we are engaging Amida’s compassionate heart and we are saying that Amida and I are not separate, but one.

That might sound complicated, but to put it more simply, when we say “Namo Amida Butsu,” it is an expression of gratitude. We are not asking for something we want by saying “please.” When we are grateful, we shift our thinking away from our self-centeredness. We change our reality not by asking for more, but by seeing what is already here. The change occurs inside us.

When we gassho, it is not so important to do it correctly, but it is important to think deeply why you gassho and to make it your own, so that it comes from your heart.

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