

Twirling a Flower



We can attach to, resist, or even reject traditional Buddhist practices. But letting go and diving into practice can create lightness and joy.

By [*Noelle Oxenhandler*](#)

Shakyamuni twirls a flower. Mahakashyapa smiles.

You might say that this first transmission from teacher to disciple is the beginning of form for Buddhism: the infinite vastness of awakened mind expressed in the utter particularness of *this hand, this flower*.

Or you might say that this spontaneous gesture, which can be rediscovered but never duplicated, is the very opposite of what is meant by form—if by *form* you mean a reservoir of previously used particulars, a museum of words and movements made valuable by virtue of being well worn, passed down from hand to hand, from mouth to mouth.

But perhaps there is a middle way, one that can bring us to the very mystery of form in Buddhism. For what else can we call it when an ancient relic, preserved for centuries, suddenly flares up, becoming as fresh and single in our lives as the movement of Shakyamuni's fingers [twirling a flower](#)?

Some twenty years ago a friend of mine saw a small sign in a store window in Mendocino that said "Buddhist Retreat." A few days later, having never meditated before, she found herself in the midst of a seven-day *sesshin* with a Japanese Zen master. Hour after hour she sat before a window, peacefully watching the movement of raindrops down the glass. But there was one point where everything jammed. The chanting service each morning included the [Heart Sutra](#) in Sino-Japanese. "What do the

words mean?” Carole asked when she went for her interview with the roshi. “There’s no need for you to know now,” he replied. “Just throw yourself into the chanting. I’ll translate for you when the *sesshin* is over.”

Carole repeated her question each time she saw the roshi, and each time he gave her the same reply. Finally, she walked right out the door and headed toward the ocean. She walked and walked, and she had already gone quite a long distance when she heard footsteps behind her. She turned and saw the roshi.

“Let me tell you about the *Heart Sutra*,” he said, continuing to walk with her in the direction in which she was going. [*The Bodhisattva of Compassion, practicing deep prajna wisdom*](#). . . . Line by line he translated, until Carole exclaimed, “I can say those words!” Together they turned and walked back to the *sesshin*.

Something about Carole’s unwavering refusal had moved the Zen master. She was lucky to have found a teacher who recognised that our resistance to a form may be inseparable from the very energy that the path requires of us: the fierce determination to have an authentic, first hand experience. “Be a lamp unto yourself,” Shakyamuni said.

Buddhism encompasses a vast spectrum of possible relationships to form, from the elaborate rituals of the Vajrayana to the simpler—at times radically iconoclastic—practices of Zen. To this spectrum, each of us brings our own tendencies. For some the ancient forms provide exquisite aesthetic pleasure, like a walk through beautifully tended gardens. For others, they provide deep reassurance, the sense of being brought into alignment on a thread going back for centuries. Doing it *this way, and not that* as others before us have done it *this way, and not that*, it is possible to feel relieved of the burden of our own willy-nilly desires and aversions, free to participate in what Buddhists call the great “thusness” of the universe.

At the other extreme, there are those who have a profound temperamental [aversion to form](#), a kind of allergic reaction. Beyond the posture of meditation, they experience every other form as a kind of obscenity. When I see such people gritting their teeth through one ceremony after another, I imagine they would have been much more at home in the earliest days of Buddhism, when all images of the Buddha were prohibited, save a linear

pattern of waves or the simple outline of a footprint. Traces — nothing more.

“Why ride in a Volkswagen if you can ride in a Rolls Royce?” Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche used to say — but not everyone wants to ride in a Rolls Royce. Ideally, we would each enter through the gate that most suited us temperamentally. But unfortunately there is not always a perfect match. Through the mysterious circumstances that bring each of us to the path, a Volkswagen person may find herself riding in a Rolls Royce, and the one riding in a Volkswagen may yearn for the still greater simplicity of a footprint.

Even when we feel a perfect alignment with our vehicle, there can be jarring moments. When Philip Kapleau was training in a Zen monastery in Japan, he had an excruciatingly hard time bowing. One day, observing him as he fell stiffly to the floor, his teacher exclaimed, “Kapleau-san, who do you think you’re bowing to?” At the deepest level, this question is not fundamentally different from the famous Zen question “What is it?” — and hearing the question was a memorable moment for Roshi Kapleau.

There are times, then, when a particular form can function like a koan, intensifying and collecting our resistance to the point where something gives. When it does, the sense of release can be extraordinarily sweet. For when the small self lets go at the point where it has been clinging most fiercely — suddenly a breeze can blow in through the windowless room.

Rather than resist our resistance, we can allow ourselves to explore it in intimate detail, like a bug traveling across a flower, petal by petal. Examined at close range and without judgment, each form of resistance reveals its own rich texture. Sometimes, for instance, the form seems meaningless. “This is stupid,” the mind sputters. “Why should I circumambulate clockwise rather than counterclockwise?” Such moments can be humorous or painful — yet they, too, have their grace

But what happens when we seem to fall out of the forms completely? In the midst of chanting a sutra that one has recited a thousand times, the words turn to dry husks inside the mouth. At such moments we look around and wonder what we are doing among so many strange people moving their mouths. It’s as if suddenly Cinderella’s coach turns into a

pumpkin, her beautiful dress is back to rags, and she no longer belongs at the ball.

I remember so well the pain of being without a path—and my immense relief when I was taught, by a young Thai monk, to meditate. I felt as though I'd been looking for this path my whole life, yet the forms themselves were quite alien. The strange statues and chants made me want to weep with discomfort, and somewhere I still carry a fear that the vehicle could hit a bump and expel me onto the curb.

When I allow myself to sink into this apprehension, it draws me back to an experience that I had as a child. Sometimes in the midst of the most ordinary situations—sitting around the dinner table or riding in the car—I would suddenly look into my parents' faces and all connection with them would vanish. This happened quite apart from any emotion—it wasn't that I was angry at them or holding something in—it was just that, for a split second, I saw them in the mysterious singleness of their being. Why should my mother have this particular slant of nose and cheek? Why should my father's voice have this timbre? How did it come to be that we were eating ravioli at the dinner table or whizzing past telephone poles in the car?

Such estrangement is dizzying. Yet there is something sacred about the moment when we fall out of the habit-realm. So often it is precisely such a gap, a sense of wonder or questioning at what we take for granted, that brings us to the path in the first place.

The very meaning of “religion” contains the notion of tying back, fastening, yoking. There is something for the sake of which we are willing to let the loose strands of our own predilections go. The process can be painful, yet it can also be liberating—as in the famous story when the Zen teacher pours tea into the student's cup until it overflows. It's in precisely those moments when we experience how crowded our minds are that we have the chance of letting go and experiencing just how light we can be. What a joy to simply bow and light a stick of incense.

But here we are in dangerous territory. For when the willingness to surrender our own doubts and hesitations is not grounded in a practice of genuine inquiry and insight, the risks are real. Even setting aside the danger of fanaticism, it is important not to betray our own sense of what is

right and what is real. Once, when I lived at a rural Zen center in northern California, a young woman from a Vajrayana lineage came to perform her 100,000 bows on a solo retreat. When she arrived it had already been raining for several days, and it continued to rain during the course of her stay. One evening I found her in the dark kitchen of the main house, drinking tea. She wasn't supposed to engage in a conversation with anyone, but she looked worried, so I asked her how she was.

"I'm having a lot of resistance to my practice," she said. "I keep feeling as though my cabin's moving."

"Are you from California?" I asked her.

"No," she said. "I'm from New England."

"I think your cabin's moving," I told her.

We went down with flashlights to have a look—and sure enough, in the drenched ground a chasm of several feet had opened up and surrounded her cabin. It looked as though it might soon slide down the hill.

From a certain perspective, of course, these questions and reservations about form are pure luxury. It's through the lens of deprivation that we perhaps get the truest glimpse of the power of form. In her memoir, *The Stones Cry Out*, Molyda Szymusiak, a young Cambodian woman tells a true story that began when a friend of her uncle's had a dream. In the dream, a buddha was moaning from the mud of a pond, "Help me out of here, my friend!" Guided by this dream, the two men found their way to a dry river bend, where a large bronze buddha lay in the bottom of the silt. Most statues found in this way had been decapitated, but this one was intact. The girl's uncle wanted to rescue the statue, but his friend was too frightened. To be caught in such an act was a crime punishable by death by the Khmer Rouge. That evening the uncle returned to the spot alone. He asked a passerby to help him, but the man treated him as if he were crazy.

. . . So he prayed, "Lord Buddha, I'm alone and you're too heavy. But if you wish it, you can become light." He stretched his muscles, his feet sank into the slime, but the statue moved. He pushed it closer to the edge of the pond, and with a last effort hoisted it up onto the grassy bank. . . . He told my father he felt as if he were carrying something like a big rock, no

heavier than one or two bricks. . . . Shortly afterward we all left that area, and I don't know what happened to the statue, but my uncle always said to his children, "Only bodies may be killed. Take care to keep peace in your heart."

How is it that a particular word, gesture or thing can be the embodiment of that which has no body and can never be killed? In times of extremity, the inanimate form can flower forth, like a daffodil bulb having stored its energy under the cold, hard ground. Where does this energy come from? Shakyamuni twirls a flower.

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