

## ***Ryaku Fusatsu* or The Bodhisattva Ceremony**

**Gigen Victoria Austin, San Francisco Zen Center  
Copyright 2011**

First of all, the ceremony, *Ryaku Fusatsu*: "*Ryaku*" means "short"; "*Fusatsu*" means two things, actually. One, it means to ...take care of bad karma. The other thing it means is to create good karma, or to create good conditions for practicing. So actually, *Ryaku Fusatsu* ceremony is one of the ways that we renew our vows.

The ceremony itself is very, very old, it's older than Buddhism. It's a Vedic ceremony. People do something like it in India, and actually it takes a couple days. They spend a day just fasting and cleaning their houses and purifying their houses and getting flowers and garlands and stuff. Then, on the day itself, it's kind of like the Sabbath. So the ceremony actually dates from Vedic times, and then when Buddhists started having a religion the legend goes that King Bimbisara of Magadha, who was one of Buddha's followers, decided to continue the ceremony. So they did. At first what they did was, they just got together and the monks would sit in a circle or in a place at arms' length or less than arms' length from each other. They would first prepare the room in a certain way. We still do that. We sit the same distance from each other now as the monks in Buddha's time did. That's exactly what they did. They'd just get together after cleaning the room and purifying themselves and having all good intentions, and they'd just sit there.

But very quickly, the laypeople in the community became very dissatisfied with just watching the monks sit there. And they asked if there could be some sort of recitation of Dharma at this time, other than just sitting there. So it was added, and what they decided to do was just say the rules for the monastic community, and then to check everyone out and see if they had done them or not. This was the form of the ceremony for quite some time, a couple hundred years. Then the Mahayanists came along and turned everything around. So around the time of the *Heart Sutra*, the ceremony changed. The emphasis became not so much on the 227-some-odd rules but on a few very fundamental statements of intention. So, rather than concentrating on personal purity, the ceremony became a form that became a way of giving form to our desire to be one with our intention. The ceremony as we know it now, I think, is Chinese, or the general form of it is Chinese. I'm not sure exactly of the order, or how it's arranged, but I do know that by the time of the Tendai monks they were already recording various sorts of *Fusatsu* ceremonies. So we get together now and offer incense, flowers and our intention, and bow and chant and do these various things.

So now we know what *Ryaku Fusatsu* is. But exactly what is *Ryaku Fusatsu*? When I think about doing this ceremony, what comes up for me most is that there is an enormous number of bows. A lot, a lot of bows. And also kneeling, standing, and putting your hands together like this.

And simultaneously with all this activity and motion and bowing and remembering to keep our hands together, we somehow have to give voice to these lines, these ceremonial lines. What are *those* all about? It's called the Bodhisattva Ceremony, and what's that all about?

The first part of the ceremony is when somebody comes in and offers incense and bows, and everybody does bows – that kind of collects us – and then the kokyo says something and we all repeat it: "All my ancient twisted karma, from beginningless greed, hate, and delusion, born through body, speech, and mind, I now fully avow." That's the vow of the bodhisattva, or the declaration of the bodhisattva. To be exact, Samantabhadra Bodhisattva said that. Samantabhadra is a bodhisattva. In the meal chant, we call him the Shining Practice Bodhisattva. His Chinese name means Universally Worthy. There are four great bodhisattvas, of which he's one. There's Manjusri, with the sword that cuts through the delusions, and there's Avalokitesvara, who listens, and there's Ksitigarbha, Earth Store Bodhisattva, who is the treasury of the vows that come up from the deep wellsprings of our being, and then there's Samantabhadra, who is the shining practice bodhisattva, example of conduct and practice. These are his vows, from the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, in Chapter 40.

Then after we avow our ancient twisted karma, there are some homages to the Buddhas, where we invite various buddhas and bodhisattvas to enter the room and participate and bear witness to what we are doing. Then after that we take four vows, four great vows. Then after that there are some verses about the buddhas. Recently, in the past couple of years, we have started saying the precepts after that.

Any one of the parts of the ceremony can be the part of the ceremony that's most important to you. It can be avowing karma that's important for you to do, or it could be giving yourself, or allowing the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas to enter our life right now, or it can be taking the four Great Vows, illimitable vows, or it can be a statement of our intention and our practice, vast like the sea, immersing body and mind deeply in the Way, bringing harmony to everyone. Or it can be the part at the end, where the person in the middle of the room says, "Thus on this full moon night, we offer the merit of the Bodhisattva Way to the unsurpassed or unborn nature of all being." That might be the most important part for you. Or it could just be getting together in a room and doing 36 bows with other people. Or it could be none of them, I mean it could be that this ceremony doesn't represent anything for you that daily life wouldn't represent. So I ask you, what exactly is this ceremony? Because there are going to be 30 different ceremonies for the 30 different people in this room. What's the meaning of this ceremony for you?

Is it to renew vows that you've taken? Or is it to introduce new ones? Or is it to experience the well-being that your posture and breathing and chanting can give? Or is it just because it's different from a period of zazen? What's the most important part of the ceremony? Do you have any comments or questions?

**Q: What does it mean to avow your karma?**

A: The original meaning of the line doesn't say "avow karma". It says something like "The immeasurable evil karma that I've committed, through my mouth, through my body, through my mind, I now make full and open confession thereof." So it means to take responsibility, by confessing, that it's actually yours. I guess that's why we say "avow." It doesn't mean that we've avowed it so it's O.K. The vow of Samantabhadra is actually to cut bad karma, to cut it off, to put an end to it by taking it on completely, and then completely renewing our practice. Does that answer?

**Q: It doesn't really make sense to me how one cuts one's karma by embracing it.**

A: You mean that it doesn't actually end, that karma continues?

**Q: Yeah, that's what I would think.**

A: Well, for me, if there's part of my karma that I haven't – avowed, that I don't recognize or that I don't understand, it's almost as if there's a nescient part of me, a part of me that's totally ignorant of that particular karma. Taking it on is more like a vow to me to penetrate it, to understand it, to be with it, to delve into it, to study myself, or something like that. That's just for me, so I don't know if it's the same for you.

**Q: Well, I think insofar as you're haunted by it until you recognize it, that makes sense.**

A: It's not just psychologically haunted either. I feel "haunted" – that's a really good word, because it kind of hovers and perfumes everything until ... One of the first koans they give people in Aitken Roshi's sangha is "Save a ghost." After Mu, they say, "Save a ghost." I feel that's what avowing karma is like – you're saving a ghost.