

The Morning Bell Chant

By Jeong Ji, 1/29/19

Comments on Chanting

Chanting meditation means keeping a not-moving mind and perceiving the sound of your own voice. Perceiving your voice means perceiving your true self or true nature. Then you and the sound are never separate, which means that you and the whole universe are never separate. Thus, to perceive our true nature is to perceive universal substance. This is called nirvana. This is chanting meditation, chanting Zen. If you have "I" then it is "my" sound. But with a mind clear like space, sometimes even the sound of a dog barking or a car horn honking will bring enlightenment, because at that moment you and the sound become one. When you and the sound become one, you don't hear the sound, you are the sound.

One famous Zen master only heard the sound of a rooster crowing and was enlightened. Another Zen master was just sweeping the yard when his broom threw a rock against a piece of bamboo with a loud knock and he was enlightened. He and the sound had become one. At the moment of true perceiving, there is no thought, no separation, only perceiving sound. This is the crucial point. So during chanting time, perceive your own voice and the voice of others, just perceive this bell or drum sound, and cut off all thinking. Then your wisdom-mind will grow, you will get enlightenment and thus save all beings.

Zen Master Seung Sahn: In Zen we practice in order to clarify and transform our deeply rooted karma. According to ancient Chinese medicine, it is said that in order to heal a hot sickness, hot medicine should be use, cold sickness/cold medicine. In Zen we have a capping phrase, "The tongue has no bone." This is because the tongue can say one thing in one sentence, and in the next breath say an entirely different thing. The tongue can make anything. This is the source of all lies and gossip. By itself, the tongue has no direction, so it has no bone. As medicine for this flapping tongue, we chant.

- **Overview**

- Practiced in monasteries and temples throughout the world, however the exact origins are unknown. When and why this chant came to be adopted in its present form is an ongoing subject of debates and interpretations among various Buddhist scholars.

- Composition—A unique combination of Hwa Yen, Pure Land, and Zen Buddhism
 - o **Hwa Yen** is a school of Mahayana Buddhism that flourished in T'ang Dynasty China, based, primarily on the Avatamsaka Sutra, the earliest writings dating back to the 2nd century. Main principle of the Avatamsaka Sūtra is the unity of the absolute and the relative.
 - o **Pure Land Buddhism**, also Mahayana in principle, is probably the most popular branch of Buddhism practiced today, especially in East Asia. Pure Land focuses on Amitabul, the Buddha of Infinite Light. Pure Land Buddhism has its own style of meditation, particularly in the recitation of Buddha's name. Around the year 1000, in China, a Pure Land Zen School was started. It may be that the earliest form of the Morning Bell Chant originated here.
- Language—Chinese, except for the Sanskrit mantras. The Korean pronunciation of the Chinese words is said to be similar to the pronunciation of Chinese during the T'ang Dynasty. I've handed out a free-style translation of the Morning Bell Chant, along with a literal, word-by-word translation so you can get a feel for the words and their meanings better.
 - o Our Precepts names are all taken from the Morning Bell Chant. A newly established tradition in our sangha inspired by an old village custom in China, in which each village has a poem from which newborns are named.

The Chant

1. **Opening Bell Gatha** (different translations, this one is a little different from the handout). Similar to the Evening Bell chant

May the sound of this bell spread throughout the universe,
Lift the thick darkness over the Great Iron Mountains,
Relieve the three realms of suffering and shatter the hell of swords,
And bring all sentient beings to perfect enlightenment. (from the Korean Jogye Order)

On a contemporary footing, this reminds me of the late Leonard Cohen's song lyrics from "Anthem", which gives an altogether new spin on the Avatamsaka Sutra: "Ring the bells that still can ring/ Forget your perfect offering/ There is a crack, a crack in everything/ That's how the light gets in."

Sound has, historically, awakened many beings. It is always present, always intimate. Listening to the bell, we receive the offering of our own awakening.

2. **Vairocana**

Vairocana appears in our chants in the beginning of the morning bell chant, where he is called Biro. A cosmic Buddha, he presides over the assembly, but never speaks. Vairocana's body is the universe, and also the generator of the universe. Manifesting everywhere, he is completely empty. Perfectly still, he never rests. He is the original body of all buddhas, and the generator of all buddhas. In other words, Vairocana is the embodied name for the Absolute.

According to the Mahayana Buddhist teaching, it is said a buddha has three bodies, called dharmakaya, sambhogakaya and nirmanakaya.

The dharmakaya is the Absolute; the essence of the universe; beyond existence or nonexistence, and beyond concepts. Put another way, the dharmakaya is sometimes compared to atmosphere (comparable to our phrase, "clear like space"; the sambhogakaya is compared to clouds, and the nirmanakaya is the rain. In our way of speaking about the dharma in our Zen Circle, dharmakaya is Absolute World. Sambhogakaya is Truth World, and nirmanakaya is Moment World.

3. The Avatamsaka Sutra

Opening the case is a metaphor for opening our minds. As soon as the sutra is opening, its primary teaching appears: JIN JIN HON IP/ CHAL CHAL WOL LYUNG, which means, literally, "Dust, dust, mix, enter/ Moment, moment, completely fuse." Every particle interpenetrates every other particle; every moment contains every other moment.

To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour
By William Blake

4. 1st Poem and the Mantra of Shattering Hell

The poem can be found on p. 452 of Cleary's translation of the Avatamsaka Sutra. Presenting another primary teaching of Hwa Yen Buddhism: all things are created by mind alone. Another way of saying this is that everything is made out of consciousness, every particle in the universe is conscious and consists of consciousness. We might say it another way, that the universe is the creative act of consciousness. As soon as we attain that, hell is shattered, as is expressed in the following chant.

5. Amitabul

A second cosmic Buddha named in the Morning Bell chant, Amitabha (Amitabul in Korean pronunciation) is characterized as having established the Western Pure Land for the benefit of all beings. “Amitabha” means “Infinite Light”.

Amitabul and Vairocana are two of the five iconic Dhyani Buddhas: in Mahayana Buddhism, and particularly in Vajrayana (Tantric) Buddhism, these are “self-born” celestial buddhas who have always existed from the beginning of time, of which Vairocana is the central figure.

Here in the Morning Bell chant, there is a blending of Pure Land teaching—constant devotion to Amitabul as the basis of practice and liberation, along with the Hwa Yen philosophy of emptiness and interconnection.

What is the Mind of Minds? Everyday mind—what do you see, what do you hear?—always connects to Amitabul’s light. We never leave the golden form of the universe. A thought-moment, a moment of consciousness.

One translation point of note: (this is a comment by Stan Lombardo) The meaning of the word, “namu” in Sanskrit is “pay homage, venerate, praise, take refuge with”. Seung Sahn’s translation of the word is “become one with”. So in a true Zen approach, subject and object disappear; we do not go to Amitabul to be saved by him. Rather, we become Amitabul.

6. Three Poems

The first two of these three poems are originally separate Zen poems from the 11th or 12th c. in China. Both frame a juxtaposition, the meeting point (which is the enlightened experience) of relative (the provisional moment) and absolute (Don’t Know Mind, Substance, Stillness, Original Nature, Emptiness). This can only be attained by “being with all beings without hindrance,” as the first poem puts it.

The third poem joins one vow to all other vows, with our intention to use every opportunity to be of service. The last line of the poem, Ja Ta Il She Song Bul Do, You and I simultaneously attain the Way of Buddha, is also the last line of Homage to the Three Jewels, and expresses, again, the experience of inter-being. “Self” and “other”, “you” and “I” are not separate. Our attainment of the Buddha Way can only be simultaneous.

Each of the poems is punctuated by the strike of the bell and followed by the mantra Namu Amita Bul, framing each poem as a little meditation.

so much depends/ upon/ a red wheel/ barrow

glazed with rain/ water

beside the white/ chickens. -“The Red Wheelbarrow” by William Carlos Williams

7. The Pure Land

Amitabha established the Pure Land by virtue of his 48 vows. One of his vows is that anyone who recites his name sincerely will be reborn in the Pure Land, there to receive guidance and be prepared for enlightenment. As such, Amitabha is our great teacher, the embodiment of great love, great compassion (Dae Ja Dae Bi).

Amitabha’s Western Pure Land is a spiritual realm sometimes called a Buddha field (“Bul Chal”), but it is worth noting that “chal” used in other contexts can mean “moment”. In the Avatamsaka Sutra, each one of the many enlightening beings presides over a Buddha field, and all of these Buddha fields interpenetrate, coexist and co-extend with the universe. These Buddha fields are as innumerable as grains of sand, dust particles, blades of grass. All of the large numbers (names, fields, etc) are the same as the one. Vairocana and Amitabha, the two Buddhas in this chant, and all others as well, are the same Buddha.

8. Concluding Mantra

Finally, the title of this concluding mantra conveys a deep teaching: The Mantra of Original Mind’s Sublimity. All of these Buddhas and Buddha fields are none other than our own minds, consciousness alone. This teaching recalls the line earlier in the chant, “All things are made by the mind alone.” The expedient means, the practices that Buddhism has developed to bring us to our mind’s foundation include the sutras, poetry and philosophies that are epitomized in our chanting.

Link to Zen Master Seung Sahn chanting the Morning Bell chant in the 1970’s:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RN1jSN0oSWQ&list=PLw1qYxIVCPPGssRsgksTNRIEjnJNutZSt&fbclid=IwAR1-jJlsQIWNS-UqwhBsPsla8qpP_mjSDLWuZSb6-ESfnrDK6Z25rHJMyQI

Questions to reflect on: How does the language in which a chant is practiced affect the practitioner? Is it preferable to have all chants in English?