

# On Rites, Rituals, and Ceremonies ~ Shinzen Young

00:00:00 People sometimes ask if they come to one of my retreats, will they have to participate  
00:00:15 in any kind of ceremonies or rituals?

00:00:19 I've even had people ask, if I come to one of your retreats, will I have to bow to you?

00:00:25 Well, I can tell you emphatically that you will not have to bow to me unless you want  
00:00:31 to make me feel uncomfortable.

00:00:34 But I can deal with that, that's just a rising of self-referential fit.

00:00:38 So if you want to test my practice and see how I can deal with being made to feel uncomfortable,  
00:00:45 then yes, you can bow to me.

00:00:47 But otherwise, that would definitely not be a feature of my retreats.

00:00:53 In fact, I am most happy if people look upon me as just like anybody else, like somebody  
00:01:03 you could challenge or say, you know, you screwed up or I disagree with you and so forth.

00:01:12 So no, you're not going to have to bow.

00:01:15 And no, you're not going to have to do any kind of rites or rituals or ceremonies.

00:01:19 Rites, rituals, ceremonies, we find them everywhere.

00:01:24 We find them in our early beginnings, the tribal world.

00:01:30 We find them in Christianity, particularly in the Catholic form or forms of Christianity.

00:01:42 We find them everywhere.

00:01:44 Historically, the Buddha, who lived approximately 2,500 years ago, seemed to be pretty down  
00:01:54 on rites and rituals in the sense that he clearly stated that rites and rituals in and  
00:02:01 of themselves don't have any effect on the external world and actually don't have any  
00:02:10 effect on our internal spiritual progress.

00:02:15 The rites and rituals in and of themselves.

00:02:20 And since in his culture, rites and rituals in and of themselves were considered to have  
00:02:27 a lot of effect and to be important and people's religious life, spiritual life, is often centered  
00:02:38 around these rituals, to deny the efficacy of rites and rituals was pretty damn revolutionary  
00:02:49 and actually got a lot of pushback.

00:02:54 So when we look historically at Buddhism, there would seem to be a negation of rites,  
00:03:02 rituals, ceremonies, and so forth.

00:03:07 One of the things that the Buddha taught was to pay careful attention to your experience.

00:03:16 And he said that if you pay careful attention to your experience, you will see that the  
00:03:22 nature of your experience is anicca, impermanent.

00:03:28 And you will also realize that that's the nature of everything.

00:03:34 Things change.

00:03:38 One of the things that changes is Buddhism.

00:03:44 It's a conditioned phenomenon.

00:03:46 All conditioned phenomenon, phenomena change.

00:03:50 That was the last words of the Buddha, anicca, bhatta, sankhaya.

00:03:54 All conditioned things change.

00:03:58 Conditionedism as a cultural historical phenomenon is most assuredly a conditioned thing.

00:04:05 It may point the path to something beyond conditions, but it itself is conditioned.

00:04:13 And therefore, true to the Buddha's own teaching, Buddhism changed.

00:04:20 Some people held to earlier forms of practice.

00:04:24 Some people evolved new forms of practice.

00:04:28 Some people held to earlier terminology and conceptual frameworks.

00:04:33 Other people developed new terminology, new conceptual frameworks.

00:04:39 Buddhism disappears from its native soil of India around the year 1200 AD.

00:04:47 It was a long process, but if you want a sort of, okay, to think in easy, round numbers,

00:04:55 you can think of Buddhist history as spanning on Indian soil approximately 1700 years.

00:05:05 There's the 500 years of the BC, and then there's about 1200 years of the AD.

00:05:11 Fortunately, Buddhism, by the time it was wiped out in India, had been propagated throughout

00:05:20 the rest of Asia, preserved, and now, in fact, has been reintroduced into India.

00:05:26 During that 1700 years, changes took place about 500 years after the Buddha's death,

00:05:37 very, very roughly speaking.

00:05:39 Once again, just to give you some simple whole number benchmarks.

00:05:43 A reaction to early Buddhism arose that said it's not enough just to be liberated for your

00:05:55 own liberation.

00:05:57 It's equally important to contribute to the liberation and broadly the welfare of other

00:06:05 people.

00:06:06 Those two are on the same footing.

00:06:09 So that's called Mahayana Buddhism.

00:06:12 The Buddha's life exemplified that.

00:06:14 He served, but his teachings tended to tell people you need to sort of get yourself liberated.

00:06:25 About 700 years after the Mahayana revolution started, the Vajrayana revolution started,

00:06:34 so from say 700 AD to 1200 AD, there developed something called Vajrayana out of Mahayana.

00:06:44 Vajrayana is known by a lot of different names, but we'll just use that one for now.

00:06:50 What's interesting about Vajrayana is relative to rites and rituals, it's at the other end

00:06:54 of the spectrum.

00:06:56 It's all about rites and rituals.

00:07:01 So does this mean that Vajrayana is the ultimate degradation of the original teachings of the

00:07:06 Buddha?

00:07:07 Not at all.

00:07:11 The Buddha said rites and rituals in and of themselves are not efficacious, but rites

00:07:20 and rituals, if you wish, can create an ideal situation to develop concentration, sensory

00:07:32 clarity, and equanimity.

00:07:34 They can be vehicles for a meditative practice.

00:07:41 So if you make it a vehicle for a meditative practice, you use the simplified situation,

00:07:47 the repetitiveness, the symbolism, and so forth, then your rite and ritual can be a

00:07:55 legitimate practice.

00:07:58 There was a famous Kapalistic master in Judaism who said, Judaism without Kavana is idolatry.

00:08:06 Kavana is the Hebrew word for high concentration, implying that if you just superficially do  
00:08:14 the Jewish liturgy, you might as well be worshipping idols.  
00:08:19 On the other hand, if you intentionally focus and use that environment to cultivate a certain  
00:08:27 state of consciousness, then it's a powerful practice.  
00:08:34 We don't use rites and rituals at my retreats, but we often will do a sweat lodge afterwards,  
00:08:42 for those who wish to, to go back to a very ancient form of rite and ritual, one that  
00:08:49 most assuredly develops deep concentration, clarity, and equanimity.