

NINE BOWS

Nine Bows is a practice of renewal and intention that can be performed in a short time before your daily meditation practice or at any time. It is usually practiced before an altar, but any object can be an altar if a formal altar is not available. For those unfamiliar with bowing or those who experience some aversion to bowing, this short commentary by Shunryu Suzuki may help:

<https://tricycle.org/magazine/shunryu-suzuki-bowing/>. For those uncertain about the correct way to bow the following video offers instructions: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LjQ_L8xaYoY. For those physically unable to perform deep bows, a half bow from the waist, or even no bow with hands positioned palms together and fingers aligned upward at chest level (in gassho) will serve just as well. If one is in a public place and doesn't wish to draw attention, the lines below can be recited silently without any gesture. If confined to a bed the lines can be recited lying down. So long as a person is conscious, Nine Bows practice can be a refuge. Each of the following lines is recited aloud (or silently) with one bow for each line.

- 1) *All the wrong karmas made by me were created from beginningless attachment, aversion, and delusion born of the body, speech, and mind. I now repent them all.*
- 2) *All the wrong karmas made by me were created from beginningless attachment, aversion, and delusion born of the body, speech, and mind. I now repent them all.*
- 3) *All the wrong karmas made by me were created from beginningless attachment, aversion, and delusion born of the body, speech, and mind. I now repent them all.*
- 4) *I take refuge in the Buddha.*
- 5) *I take refuge in the Dharma.*
- 6) *I take refuge in the Sangha.*
- 7) *I vow to avoid doing harm.*
- 8) *I vow to be of benefit.*
- 9) *I vow to regard all beings as kindred spirits.*

This is followed by a recitation of the Buddha's **Five Remembrances** modified slightly from the version offered by Thich Nhat Hahn.

- 1) *I am of the nature to grow old. There is no way to escape from growing old.*
- 2) *I am of the nature to have ill-health. There is no way to escape from ill-health.*
- 3) *I am of the nature to die. There is no way to escape from death.*
- 4) *All that is dear to me and everyone I love are of the nature to change. There is no way to escape being separated from them.*
- 5) *My actions are my only true belongings. I cannot escape the consequences of my actions. The Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha are the ground upon which I stand.*

Background

The Nine Bows practice is an abbreviated version of a formal Zen *jukai* in which a person begins his or her life as a Buddhist practitioner. *Jukai* means receiving (*ju*) precepts (*kai*) in Japanese. The Nine Bows emphasize that this is not a one-time ceremonial event, and that the precepts are not so much received as they are practiced daily.

The first three bows incorporate the vow of repentance. Repentance, in Buddhist terms, is full acknowledgement of any harm you may have committed in the past along with an intention not to repeat similar harmful behaviors in the future. It is repeated three times to emphasize the importance of repentance in Buddhist practice. It also reflects the threefold expression of harm through body (actions), speech, and mind (harboring unskillful intentions). So, the first three bows have to do with the past. The next three are about the present.

Having acknowledged the past, refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha is full acceptance of the present, encountering the phenomena of your life as they present themselves with the foundation of the Buddha's teachings and the community of supportive friends. Fundamentally, it is taking refuge in that which is real, instead of that which is mentally fabricated or, as Shunryu Suzuki put it, taking refuge in "things as it is." (See <https://www.lionsroar.com/things-as-it-is/>) Paradoxically, essential to seeing things as they are, is recognition that we can never fully see things as they are, because total reality (the Dharma) is fundamentally ungraspable and delusions are inexhaustible. So, it requires an element of faith, but not blind faith – faith in the practice and the teaching with eyes wide open. As stated in the Dhammapada, one of the earliest records of the Buddha's teachings,

People driven by fear betake themselves to numerous refuges, such as mountains, forests, groves, sacred trees and shrines.

Verily, none of these is a safe refuge, nor is it the supreme refuge. For even after arriving at a refuge, one is not emancipated from all suffering.

He who takes refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha perceives with clarity of wisdom the Four Noble Truths, namely:

Suffering, the Origin of Suffering, the Cessation of Suffering, the Noble Eightfold Path that leads to the cessation of suffering.

That, verily, is the safe refuge and supreme refuge. After having arrived at that refuge, a person is emancipated from all suffering.

The final three bows are about the future and settings intentions, each of these bows for each of the three Pure Precepts. These also refer to a passage in the Dhammapada,

To shun all evil.

To do good.

To purify one's heart.

This is the teaching of the Buddha.

In the Mahayana tradition, the third vow often altered to a phrase like, “To save all beings.” In a sense the two are equivalent. When one speaks and acts with a pure heart, unclouded by self-centeredness, one saves all the beings one encounters from the damaging potential of an afflicted mind.

I substitute the phrase, “To regard all beings as kindred spirits,” because it is, for me, equivalent and more understandable. Whatever bias or prejudice I bring to the meeting, it is a reminder that all beings are kindred, of the same kind. They are also, like me, spirits, having no fixed self-nature, subject to conditions, and possess the potential for transformation and growth in each moment. It helps me avoid solidifying others into an enemy or a means to an end. It sparks awareness of the fundamental mystery of self and others.

Following the nine bows, I find it helpful to recite the Five Remembrances and conclude with a return to the Three Refuges. These also have an early source in the *Upajjhatthana Sutta (Subjects of contemplation, AN 5.57)*. These are “facts that one should reflect on often, whether one is a woman or a man, lay or ordained.”

They remind us of the three messengers Siddhartha encountered when he first ventured outside the palace walls: an old person, a sick person, and a corpse. They remind us of the impermanence of everything that we see, hear, touch, taste, and smell. They remind us not to fall into the trance of believing that we and those we love will live forever in good health. They remind us of the inevitable, but often unpredictable, consequences of our actions and our ultimate responsibility for those consequences. The final sentence is a reminder, once again, to take refuge because life can be difficult, as the Buddha was quick to point out. This sentence is modified from Thich Nhat Hahn’s “My actions are the ground upon which I stand,” because, try as I might, my actions do not always seem like firm footing. The Triple Treasure does.

Nine bows and five remembrances seem well suited as daily practice for the lay person. They help in acknowledging the past, accepting the present, and setting intention for whatever the day may bring (repentance, refuge, resolve). This practice is pieced together from several sources, like a patchwork robe, and is open to further modification as needed. I hope you will find this description of the Nine Bows useful whether you choose to practice it or not.

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