

The Morning Bell Chant

The Morning Bell Chant practiced in the Kwan Um School of Zen combines three major Buddhist traditions: Hwa Yen (Hwa Om) Buddhism, Pure Land Buddhism, and Zen Buddhism. Hwa Yen Buddhism is based on the Avatamsaka Sutra, the most comprehensive of all the Mahayana sutras and one which presents the bodhisattva ideal of universal liberation in truly cosmic terms.

Hwa Yen Buddhism was both a philosophical school and a mass movement within Buddhism in China and Korea. Huge societies would form to chant the Avatamsaka Sutra, which runs to over 1600 pages in English translation.

Pure Land Buddhism is still the most popular form of Buddhism in the world. The central figure in Pure Land Buddhism is Amitabul, the Buddha of Infinite Light, who, eons ago, established a Western Pure Land, an ideal environment in which to practice and get enlightenment, a land open to everyone who chants this Buddha's name. Original Pure Land Buddhism also involved meditation practice, and in China, around the year 1000 there developed a Pure Land Zen School. It was probably about this time or a little later that the Morning Bell Chant, or its ancestor, was created.

The chant is here divided into sections to make its structure clear. The translation in italics is freely adapted from an early version used in the Kwan Um School of Zen. The language of the chant is Chinese, except for the two Sanskrit mantras. The Korean pronunciation of the Chinese words is said to be very similar to the pronunciation of Chinese in the T'ang dynasty. The literal meaning of each Chinese-Korean word is given as an aid to understanding the meaning and experiencing the chant directly.

1. The Bell Gatha

WON CHA JONG SONG BYON BOP KYE
Vow this bell sound fills dharma world
Vowing this bell sound spreads through the whole universe

CHOR WI YU-AM SHIL GAE MYONG
iron wall dark fully all bright
Making all the Hell of Dark Metal bright,

SAM DO I GO PA DO SAN
three ways ease pain shatter sword mountain
Relieving the three realms of suffering, shattering the Hell of Swords;

IL-CHE JUNG SAENG SONG JONG GAK
All many beings attain correct enlightenment
All beings become enlightened.

The chant begins with a gatha—a short poem that connects everyday occurrences in our lives to a bodhisattva vow. When I showed the Chinese text of the Morning Bell Chant to a monk from Taiwan, he said that he had learned this gatha when he was young, in exactly the same words as in the chant, but he had never seen the rest of the chant. He said he was taught to say the gatha whenever he heard the sound of any bell. The Evening Bell Chant is another such gatha. In the Morning Bell Chant our vow (or intention or wish) goes out with the sound of the bell through the whole universe, and the vibrations shatter the metallic hells that imprison us and perpetuate our suffering. Once these dark

realms are broken open, the radiance of the universe pours through and all beings become enlightened. So the gatha expresses a vow to save all beings, but it also presents a metaphor for our own practice, the practice of opening our minds.

2. Vairocana

NA-MU BI-RO GYO JU HWA JANG JA JON
Namu Vairocana teaching master flower womb love lord
Become one with Vairocana, lotus world master, Great Love, Holy One.

Here the chant expresses our unity with Vairocana, the cosmic Buddha who presides over the assembly in the Hwa Yen Sutra although he himself never speaks (numerous, wonderful bodhisattvas do all the talking). Vairocana, like Amitabul, is also a Buddha of light—he radiates light like a quasar, and every photon contains countless Buddhas: he is constantly birthing Buddhas from the flower womb of the universe and he is the universe itself. This primordial Buddha is the Buddha of the Avatamsaka Sutra, the Flower Adornment Sutra.

3. The Avatamsaka Sutra

YON BO GYE JI GUM MUN
Expound treasured poem of golden text
Expound the treasured verses of the golden text,

PO NANG HAM JI OK CHUK
Open carnelian case of jade scroll
Open the carnelian case of the jade scroll:

JIN JIN HON IP
dust dust mix enter
Every dust particle interpenetrates,

CHAL CHAL WOL LYUNG
Moment moment completely fuse
Every moment contains every other.

SHIP JO KU MAN O CHON SA SHIP PAL CHA
10 1,000,000 9 10,000 5 1,000 4 10 8 words
100,095,048 words

IL SUNG WON GYO
One vehicle complete teaching
Are the complete teaching of the One Vehicle.

NA-MU DAE BANG GWANG BUL HWA OM GYONG
Namu great wide direction Buddha flower adorn sutra
Become one with the Great Wide Buddha, the Avatamsaka Sutra.

Here we open the sutra itself, a golden text on jade scrolls that we take out of a carnelian case, and the opening of the case (or the unrolling of the scrolls) is another metaphor for opening our minds. As soon as the sutra is opened out comes its fundamental teaching: JIN JIN HON IP/ CHAL CHAL WOL LYUNG, literally “Dust, dust, mix, enter,/ Moment, moment, completely fuse.” Every particle interpenetrates every other particle; every moment contains every other moment. The text of the sutra contains millions of words and constitutes the complete teaching of the great wide Buddha, the cosmic Buddha as identical with that Buddha.

4. The First Poem & the Mantra of Shattering Hell

JE-IL GYE
first poem
The first poem:

YAG IN YONG NYO JI
if one wants fully understand
If you wish to thoroughly understand

SAM SE I-CHE BUL
three worlds all Buddhas
All the Buddhas of the past, present, and future,

UNG GWAN BOP KYE SONG
should view dharma world nature
You should view the nature of the Universe

IL-CHE YU SHIM JO
all only mind make
As being created by mind alone.

PA JI OK JIN ON
shatter earth prison true words
The Mantra of Shattering Hell:

NA-MU A-TTA SHI-JI-NAM
SAM-MYAK SAM-MOT-TA GU-CHI-NAM
OM A-JA-NA BA-BA JI-RI JI-RI HUM

From all these millions of words in the sutra one poem appears, the first of several which will appear in the chant. In the sutra, this poem is spoken by the bodhisattva Forest of Awareness, one of the many enlightening beings who speak in the sutra. (It can be found on p. 452 of the Thomas Cleary translation published by Shambala). This poem presents another fundamental 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. As soon as we get

that, hell is shattered, and so the mantra of shattering hell appears next in the chant. The Chinese expression for mantra is literally “true words.” A mantra comes from the depths of our human experience, as does a vow. This mantra, in Sanskrit like most mantras, takes us back to our vow to shatter hell that began the chant, and it concludes this section. The next part of the chant will introduce Amitabul, the Buddha of Infinite Light.

5. Amitabul

WON A JIN SAENG MU BYOL LYOM
 Vow I exhaust life no other thought
I vow for my whole life, without separate mind,

A-MI-TA BUL DOK SANG SU
 Amita Buddha uniquely marked follow
to only follow Amitabul, the Buddha with unique marks.

SHIM SHIM SANG GYE OK HO GWANG
 Mind mind always joins jade curl light
The Mind of Minds always connects to the jewel of wisdom’s light.

YOM NYOM BUL LI GUM SAEK SANG
 Thought-moment thought-moment not leave golden form marked
Moment to moment, without leaving this golden form,

A JIP YOM JU BOP KYE GWAN
 I hold thought beads dharma world perceive
I hold beads, perceiving this world.

HO GONG WI SUNG MU BUL GWAN
 Empty space is string nothing not strung
Emptiness is a string that leaves nothing unstrung.

PYONG DUNG SA-NA MU HA CHO
 Equal rank Vairocana has no fixed place
Vairocana is everywhere, everything is equal.

GWAN GU SO BANG A-MI-TA
 Perceive pray west region Amita
Contemplate the Western Amita.

NA-MU SO BANG DAE GYO JU

Namu west region great teaching master
Become one with the Great Western Master,

MU RYANG SU YO RAE BUL
No limit long life thus come Buddha
Infinite Time, Infinite Space, Thus-Come Buddha.

NA-MU A-MI-TA BUL
Namu Amita Buddha
Become One with Amitabul.

After introducing us to Vairocana, the great cosmic Buddha of the Avatamsaka Sutra, the chant now brings forward another cosmic Buddha, Amitabha, the Buddha who established the Western Pure Land for the benefit of all beings. There will be more about the Western Pure Land and Amitabha's vows later in the chant.

Amitabha's name means "infinite light" ("a-" in Sanskrit is a negative prefix like "un-" or "in-"; "mita" means "measure"; "bha" means "light"). The name is often shortened to "Amita," with "bul," meaning "Buddha," added to it to produce the form "Amitabul" in Chinese and Korean. Amitabul's light comes from his *urna*, the curl of white hairs between his eyebrows (the "jade curl," a kind of third eye, one of the thirty-two marks of a Buddha) and illuminates the universe. Amitabha and Vairocana, whose name means "shining like the sun," have different origins, but it is natural that these two luminous cosmic Buddhas are paired in this chant, or even identified with each other, as they seem to be in this section.

Equally noteworthy in this section is the blending of Pure Land teaching—constant devotion to Amitabul as the basis of practice and liberation—with the Hwa Yen philosophy of emptiness and universal interconnection. The Mind of Minds, which is our ordinary mind, always connects to Amitabul's light. We never leave the golden form of the universe. Practicing with meditation beads—*yom ju*— we perceive the dharma world, the world as it actually is, and recognize that emptiness, the space of no hindrance, connects everything just as string connects the beads we are holding. When we practice, repeating *Namu Amitabul* (the essential Pure Land practice) as we move the beads, each bead corresponds to a *yom* (a word also spelled *lyom* and *nyom* in this section), a thought-moment, a moment of consciousness. In this way, Pure Land practice and Zen practice are not different.

This section begins with a vow to become one with Amitabul and ends with the practice—the repetition of *Namu Amitabul*—that actualizes that vow. I have always been struck by Zen Master Seung Sahn's translation of *namu* as "become one with." The meaning of the word in Sanskrit is given as "pay homage, venerate, praise" but also as "take refuge with." Understanding it as "become one with" eliminates the subject-object separation implicit in the other translations. It is not that we go to Amitabul, who then saves us, but that we become Amitabul. This is the spirit of practice in the Morning Bell Chant, and it will find poetic expression in the verses that begin the next section.

6. Three Poems

(1)

CHONG SAN CHOP-CHOP MI-TA GUL
blue mountain ridge ridge Amita home

The blue Mountain of many ridges is Buddha's home.

CHANG HE MANG-MANG JONG MYOL GUNG
blue-green ocean vast vast still extinction palace
The vast blue ocean is the Palace of Still Extinction.

MUL-MUL YOM NAE MU GA AE
beings beings take come no hindrance obstacle
Being with all things without hindrance,

KI GAN SONG JONG HAK DU HONG
few see pine tree crane head red
Few can see the red crane's head on the pine tree.

NA-MU A-MI-TA BUL
Namu Amita Buddha
Become One, Infinite Time, Infinite Space Buddha

(2)

SAN DAN JONG YA JWA MU ON
Mountain hall quiet night sit no words
Sitting silently in a mountain temple in the quiet night,

JOK-CHONG NYO-YO BON JA YON
quiet quiet still still original nature surely
Extreme quiet and stillness are original nature.

HA SA SO PUNG DONG NIM YA
what business west wind shake forest wilderness
Why does the Western wind shake the forest?

IL SONG HAN ANG NYU JANG CHON
one sound cold geese cry long sky
A single cry of the cold-weather geese fills the sky.

NA-MU A-MI-TA BUL
Namu Amita Buddha
Become One, Infinite Time, Infinite Space Buddha

(3)

WON GONG BOP KYE JAE JUNG SAENG
vow together dharma world all many beings
Vowing together with all world beings

DONG IP MI-TA DAE WON HAE
together enter Amita great vow ocean
Together into Buddha's Ocean of Great Vows

JIN MI RAE JE DO JUNG SAENG
exhaust future come occasion save many beings
To save beings of numberless worlds

JA TA IL SHI SONG BUL DO
self other one time attain Buddha way (Tao)
You and I simultaneously attain the Way of Buddha.

NA-MU A-MI-TA BUL
Namu Amita Buddha
Become One, Infinite Time, Infinite Space Buddha

The first two of these three poems (there are as many as seven in longer versions of the Morning Bell Chant used in Korea) are in origin Zen poems composed in China some time around the 11th or 12th century. Both poems have a similar structure, moving from an expression of the emptiness and universality of original nature to an acute awareness of this present moment. The second poem is particularly successful in that it combines in its last line the poignant, just-now quality of the cry of the geese with the open experience of the vast emptiness of the sky. The absolute and the phenomenal become one; form is emptiness, emptiness is form. We can only attain this by “being with all beings without hindrance,” as the first poem puts it.

The third poem, in the form of a vow, continues the theme of profound action in unison, plunging us together with all beings into Amitabul’s ocean of vows to use every opportunity to work for universal liberation. The last line of the poem (which is also the last line, chanted to a different melody, of the Homage to the Three Jewels) expresses once more the experience of unity and mutuality in our practice. “Self” and “other,” “you” and “I,” are not separate, and our attainment of the Buddha Way, our enlightenment, can only be simultaneous.

Each of the poems is punctuated with a strike of the bell and followed by a repetition of the mantra *Namu Amita Bul*, framing each poem as a little meditation exercise, returning us to actual practice, and providing an efficacious moment in which to wake up.

7. The Pure Land

NAMU SO BANG JONG TO GUNG NAK SE GYE
Namu western pure land extreme joy world
Become one with the western Pure Land, a world of utmost bliss

SAM SHIM NYUNG MAN-OK IL SHIB IL MAN GU CHON O BAEK
3 10 6 1,000,000,000 1 10 1 10,000 9 1,000 5 100
The thirty-six billion, one hundred nineteen thousand, five hundred

DONG MYONG DONG HO
same name same meaning
names of the Buddha are all the same name.

DAE JA DAE BI A MI TA BUL
great love great compassion Amita Buddha
Great love, great compassion, Amita Buddha.

NAMU SO BANG JONG TO GUNG NAK SE GYE
Namu western direction pure land extreme joy world
Become one with the western Pure Land, a world of utmost bliss

BUL SHIN JANG GWANG
Buddha body long wide
This Buddha's body is long and wide.

SANG HO MU BYON GUM SAEK KWANG MYONG
face good no limit gold color shine bright
This auspicious face is without boundary, and this golden color shines everywhere,

BYON JO BOP GYE
everywhere illumine dharma world
pervading the entire universe.

SA SHIP PAR WON DO TAL JUNG SAENG
four ten eight vows free save many beings
Forty-eight vows to save all sentient beings.

BUL GA SOL BUL GA SOL CHON
not can say not can say opposite
No one can say, nor say its opposite.

BUL GA SOL HANG HA SA BUL CHAL MI JIN SU
not can say eternal river sand Buddha fields fine dust number
*No one can say, because this Buddha is like the Ganges's innumerable grains of sand,
or the infinite moments in all time, or innumerable dust particles,*

DO MAK CHUG WI MU HAN GUK SU
rice hemp bamboo reeds no limit extreme number
or countless blades of grass, numberless number.

SAM BAENG NYUNG SHIM MAN-OK IL SHIB IL MAN GU CHON O BAEK
3 100 6 10 1,000,000,000 1 10 1 10,000 9 1000 5 100
The three hundred sixty billion, one hundred nineteen thousand, five hundred

DONG MYONG DONG HO
same name same meaning
names of the Buddha are all the same name.

DAE JA DAE BI
great love great compassion
Great love, great compassion,

A DUNG DO SA
our guide teacher
our original teacher.

KUM SAEK YO RAE NAMU AMITA BUL
gold form thus come namu Amita Buddha
Homage to the golden Tathagata Amita Buddha.

NAMU AMITABUL (5x)
Namu Amita Buddha
Become one: infinite time, infinite space Buddha.

8. Concluding Mantra

BON SHIM MI MYO JIN ON
original mind sublime mystic true words
The mantra of original mind's sublimity:

DA NYA TA
OM A RI DA RA SA BA HA (3x)

The seventh section of the Morning Bell Chant takes us to Pure Land that Amitabha established in the West by virtue of his Forty-Eight Vows. One of Amitabha's vows is that anyone who recites his name sincerely will be reborn in the Pure Land, there to receive his guidance and be prepared for enlightenment. Thus 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 note that the same word "chal" in other contexts can be translated as "moment"). In the Hua Yen Sutra, each of the innumerable Buddhas presides over a Buddha field, and all of these Buddha fields interpenetrate each other since they are all coexistent and coextensive with the universe. These Buddha fields are as innumerable as the grains of sand in the Ganges, or dust particles, or blades of grass (colorfully expressed here as "rice, hemp, bamboo, reeds!"). In the same way all the various names of the Buddhas, expressed by the large numbers (the second of which is inexplicably ten times larger than the first) in this section of the chant all reduce to the same name. So Vairocana and Amitabha, the two Buddhas we have met in this chant, and all other Buddhas are all the same Buddha.

And all of these Buddhas and Buddha fields are none other than our own minds. This deep teaching is driven home in the chant's concluding section, the Mantra of Original Mind's Sublimity. This mantra recalls the line earlier in the chant, "All things are made by the mind alone." Zen practice is a deep investigation of the mind. As Mu Mun said, "Buddhism takes mind as its foundation." The expedient means that Buddhism has developed to bring us to our mind's foundation includes the sutras, poetry and philosophy that are epitomized in our chanting, especially in the Morning Bell Chant. Zen schools have always used, and still use today, these expedient means freely and in the spirit of genuine practice to instill the essential teachings of Buddhism into the body-minds of practitioners.

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