

## **Sangha Bell Practice**

**“The bell master holds and protects the space for everyone.”**

### **How to Invite the Bell** (by SnowFlower bell practitioners)

What helps me is to very much center in my body as I recite the gatha and to be aware of the connection between myself and the bell. I feel the bell and myself are one.

Inviting the bell is like meditating. I don't recite a gatha because I am not a word person. I first come into a focus place of concentration and then a wide place of opening the heart. Both of these are in the chest. I am not really me at that point any more. From that openness, I invite the bell.

I get quiet inside myself and I allow myself to *feel* the texture of the bell. I feel my breath moving in and out and I say the gatha to myself slowly and calmly. When I don't take my time, it gets kind of messy. Then, I invite the bell.

I hold the bell in my left hand, fingers spread apart. I approach it with compassion, with love, and try to imagine, to hear in my head, the sound that I hope to produce. Then I wake it very carefully. I start by holding the inviter against the rim where I intend to invite it and then carefully return to that place.

First, I breathe at least three times in and out and then I say the gatha and I think about –in the sense of I just know –how important the sound of the bell is. Then I bow and I pick up the bell in a mindful way. I hold the inviter vertically. I breathe again and then wake it up. I breathe. I invite it and then I let it ring out. I put it down very carefully

### **Bell Gathas** (most frequently used)

*Body, speech and mind in perfect oneness,  
I send my heart along with the sound of the bell.  
May the hearers awaken from forgetfulness,  
And transcend all anxiety and sorrow.*

*Listen, listen, this wonderful sound  
Brings me back to my true self.*

### **Terms**

Lingering bell -- The bell is allowed to complete its full sound. Used before and after each round of sitting meditation and before and after Sutra and Mindfulness Trainings recitations.

Stopped bell -- All bells during reciting and chanting are stopped bells, to facilitate the flow of the recitation. The bell should not continue to sound under our words. The bell is “stopped” by touching the inviter to the rim of the bell after an appropriate length of time, e.g. one, two, or three breaths, depending on the text. “Stop” the bell during a Guided Meditation and during the recitation of Sutras, Mindfulness Trainings, and, generally, wherever (bell) is indicated in the text.

Waking the bell – Always wake up the bell before inviting it. This is out of consideration for the bell if it has not been used for a time, and out of consideration for the hearers so that they are not startled by a loud sound if they have been sitting in meditation. To wake up the bell means to touch it firmly with the inviter and not move the inviter away. This muffles the sound.

Inviting the bell – We say ‘invite’ the bell, meaning invite the bell to sound. The bells we use cannot be ‘rung’ and Thay explains that ‘striking’ the bell is too harsh a term. “We never say ‘strike’ the bell, because for us the bell is a friend who can wake us up to full understanding.”

## **Welcoming the Community**

Wake up the bell, then one full sound of the bell. Making this full sound is called inviting the bell.

## **Sitting Meditation**

Before the first sit, wake up the bell, then three lingering bells with three breaths between each bell. At the end of the sit, first wake up the bell, then one lingering bell.

Follow exactly the same procedure for the second sit.

## **Walking Meditation**

Wake up the small bell. At the first invitation of the small bell, the community rises and puts aside their cushions. At the second invitation of the small bell, the community bows to one another. At the third invitation, the slow, clockwise walking begins.

After an appropriate length of time, the fourth invitation of the bell announces the end of the meditation and indicates that we should continue walking until we arrive at our place, where we remain standing until everyone else has also arrived at their place. At the last invitation of the bell, we bow to one another and take our seats for the next round of sitting.

When the group is too large for one circle, two concentric circles are formed. In that case, with the 4<sup>th</sup> invitation of the bell the walking stops and we remain standing in place where we are. The bell is invited one last time and at this invitation we bow to one another and proceed mindfully to our places. It is not necessary to explain “the five bells” for walking meditation unless there are new people present. It may, however, be necessary to announce whether one or two circles will be formed.

## **Guided Meditation**

The person leading should take a few minutes before beginning the guided meditation to explain what will take place. Then s/he makes a waking-up sound on the rim of the bell to draw the attention of the community. After a few seconds, the first guiding sentences are read, followed by the key words. A full sound of the bell, which is stopped after a few breaths, signals the practice stage.

After 5, 7, 10 breaths, or a number appropriate for you, the bell is waked up only, and the next guiding sentences are read. A stopped bell signals the next practice time, and so on, until the guided meditation is completed. Two bells indicate the end of the guided meditation.

## **Mindfulness Trainings Recitation** (Consult Plum Village Chanting Book for full ceremony.)

For a simple recitation of the Trainings, the leader first invites the bell three times. After each Training has been recited, the leader should wait three, four, or five breaths to allow the words to fully enter our being. After this silent period, a bell is invited and stopped, to indicate that it is time for the next training to be recited. The bell is invited twice after the last Training.

## **Sutra Opening Verse and Sutra Closing Verse (Sharing the Merit)**

During the full Sutra or Mindfulness Trainings Ceremonies the Sutra Opening Verse and Sutra Closing Verse are used. Wake up the bell and then three lingering bells before the Sutra Opening Verse. Wake up the bell and then three lingering bells after the Sutra Closing Verse.

## **Closing**

After announcements, SnowFlower Sangha closes by holding hands in a circle. Generally, this is preceded by one (waked) lingering bell.

Closing as done at Plum Village and at regional retreats: using small bell, one bell to stand, one to bow to each other and then one bell to bow to the altar.