

Inviting the Bell of Mindfulness
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Enjoying the Bell

The bell guides us through much of our time together — inviting us to sit, to stand, to bow, and so forth. But the bell is much more than a signal. The sound of the bell can be heard as the voice of the Buddha calling us back to the present moment. The Bellmaster is the vehicle for this invitation. A number of Sangha members have trained to be bellmaster for our gatherings. These words are reminders of basic bell practice, intended as a guide and support for bell inviting.

Inviting the bell is a deep mindfulness practice. The bellmaster should be fully present as he or she invites *and* listens to the sound of the bell. We don't say striking or hitting the bell in our tradition; we say inviting the bell. This terminology reflects the importance of the bell as a friend who calls us to live in the present. The bell of mindfulness invites the listener to come back to the here and now. When we hear the big bell, we stop what we are doing — talking, walking, whatever we are doing — and come back to conscious breathing. For three full breaths, we simply listen to the bell, aware of each in-breath and each out-breath. As we listen, we may like to practice with a verse to support our mindfulness:

Listen, Listen. (Breathing in.)

This beautiful sound calls me back to my true home. (Breathing out)

The Bellmaster

The Bellmaster supports the Sangha's mindfulness not only with the proper timing and sequence of bells, but more importantly, with his or her own mindfulness while inviting and listening to the bell. Therefore, the Bellmaster should be fully present before inviting the bell. Bellmasters are encouraged to arrive early for Sangha events. You may like to enjoy walking meditation from your car to the room, and perhaps a few minutes of silent sitting before our formal practice begins. To be fully present with the bell, take three conscious breaths before picking up the inviter. Then, hold the inviter upright with the handle resting on the ground, right hand resting on left on top of the inviter, (left-handed Bellmasters, reverse hands.) and for the first bell, say the bell-inviting verse silently.

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 the path of anxiety and sorrow

Inviting the bell typically begins with waking the bell, unless the bell has been recently invited. For example, the bell is waked before the first bell in a series of three, but not before the second and third bell. The wake or stop sound is made by inviting the bell but letting the inviter rest (stop) on the bell. The result is a muffled sound, because holding the inviter on the edge stops the bell from vibrating fully. After waking the bell, pause for about the span of one in- or one out-breath before inviting the full sound. Then the Bellmaster invites the full sound of the bell, holds the inviter in front of him or her with hands on top as before, and listens to the bell for three breaths. If inviting a series of bells, the Bellmaster should assume this posture between each bell including the final bell, simply listening. Do not lay the inviter down until *after* listening deeply to the sound of each bell for three, full, mindful breaths. After listening to the last bell for three full breaths, the Bellmaster mindfully places the inviter on the ground.

When the Bellmaster needs to offer words to guide the practice — particularly for newcomers, it's best to offer words that support only the next bell rather than the next series of bells. For example, to help practitioners focus on just one step, it can be useful at the end of sitting meditation to invite friends to enjoy massaging their feet and legs. When the Sangha seems reading, the bellmaster can say:

“The next bell invites us to stand behind our seats, facing in with palms joined.”

Wake up and then invite the small bell.

“The next bell invites to bow to each other and turn to the left.”

Invite the small bell with NO wakeup, then

“The next bell invites us to begin walking meditation, enjoying every step.”

Invite the small bell with NO wakeup, walking meditation begins

After the designated walking meditation period, wake up the small bell, then

“The next bell invites us to continue walking meditation until we reach our seats.”

Full sound of the small bell.

This sequence allows the practitioner to focus without worrying whether she'll remember the instructions for the next bell. He can let go of what happens next, trusting the bellmaster to offer words of support when the time comes.

Bell Sequences

Sitting and Walking Meditation

***Beginning Sitting Meditation:** 1 wake-up and 3 full sounds of the big bell (with three breaths between all three sounds; hands resting on the upright inviter)

***Ending Sitting Meditation:** 1 wake-up and 2 full sounds of the big bell (Enjoy three breaths after the bell; hands resting on the upright inviter); Allow time for individuals to come out of meditation, unfold legs, and massage

***Beginning Walking Meditation:** (See notes above on supporting words.) No SB to unfold

- 1 wake-up and 1 full sound of the small bell (inkin) to stand behind seats
- 1 full sound of the small bell to bow to the Sangha and turn to the left
- 1 full sound of the small bell to begin walking meditation
- About 1/2 to 3/4 of the way around the last walking circle, 1 wake-up, 1 small bell (signal to stop when you reach your seat)
- When everyone is standing behind their seats, one full sound to bow to the Sangha

Recitation

* 1 wake-up, 3 big bells; "stop" sound to begin sutra opening verse

* Reading

* 1 wake-up, 2 big bells end the recitation

* 1 stop sound; title of second reading is announced

* 2 big bells at end of last reading

* stop sound; sutra closing verse; 3 big bells at "...guidance...support...path" (If no sutra closing verse, 3 big bells invited in quicker succession than 3-breath bells)

Dharma Talk or Dharma Discussion

* 1 wake-up, 3 big bells to begin (with three breaths between all three sounds of the bell)

* 1 wake-up and 1 big bell about every 15 minutes (or at end of a thought by the speaker or when the bellmaster detects that a bell would support the Sangha)

Ending Bells (After Dharma Sharing, Recitation, or Dharma Talk)

* 1 wake-up and 3 big bells (with three breaths between each big bell)

* 1 **small** bell to unfold legs and massage in preparation for standing

* 1 **small** bell to stand behind cushions

* 1 **small** bell to bow to the Sangha and turn to the altar

* 1 **small** bell to the Buddha, offering the fruit of our practice for the benefit of all beings.

quicker succession
no only after
recitation

Meal Bells (best to have a meal bellmaster and a separate person to lead or read the contemplations)

*1 wake-up and 3 full sounds (with three breaths between each bell) STOP sound

*Announce: The Five Contemplations, then read them

*1 full sound of the bell right after last verse (no pause, no wake up, NO STOP)

[Once the meal begins, no one should rise from their seats until the two bells.]

*After 20 minutes (or the time decided upon by the teachers and Sangha), the bellmaster wakes the bell and gives two sounds of the bell closer together, about one in-breath OR one out-breath between the first and second bell.

[After the two bells, friends may get up for seconds or to clean their dishes.]

*Through the rest of the meal, the bellmaster may like to invite the bell every fifteen minutes or so to support Sangha's coming back to each breath and being present with the meal.