

Shoyo Sensei's Dharma Message

Thought On Obon*

The obon festival, a festival for beloved ones, originated in India, passed to China and eventually made it to Korea and Japan. It stems from the story of Mogallana, one of the top two disciples of the Buddha. Mogallana, through his psychic powers, saw his dead mother suffering in the realm of the hungry ghost. Realizing that it was indeed he himself that had led her there, he rushed to the Buddha to seek advice on how to release her. Buddha told him to extend deep appreciation and compassion to her for all that she had done for him, through offerings to the monks. When he did, she was immediately released. Furthermore, he realized his mother's powerful love and care for him even after she had passed away. He thought that she had taken the form of the hungry ghost to teach him the importance of appreciation for our beloved ones. At this awareness, he danced with deep joy.

Obon enables people from varying backgrounds and locales to express sorrow at the loss of loved ones and to show honor and respect for those who have given so much through their lives, whether they are parents, children, friends or military personnel. It offers all people in our community and beyond the opportunity to reflect on our human relations, our families, our friends, our community, the nation and the world without limitation. It is also the time to look at our own way of living here and now. A sense of appreciation for and respect for our ancestors, parents and loved ones is universal.

Modern science, through DNA analysis as well as archaeological study, has shown that we are all descended from common ancestors. We are all interconnected in the stream of life over the millennia and the centuries, irrespective of what background we come from. The growing recognition of this interconnectedness and oneness of all humanity is given symbolic and dynamic expression in the Obon festival: appreciation to all humans who left this world before us.

The Buddhist understanding goes further. Dynamic interconnectedness and oneness of all life forms and all living beings makes us aware of our deep indebtedness and thankfulness to not only humans but also non-humans who are not here with us any more.

Buddhists also see Life and Death as one, not separately. The Japanese term "Shoji" means "LifeDeath," not "Life and Death" or "Life or Death." Buddhists do not see Life as good and beautiful and Death as bad and ugly, discriminating them judgmentally. LifeDeath is simply an ongoing process of our daily life. We, humans, as well as non-humans, are like waves in the vast ocean of LifeDeath.

In conclusion, Obon reminds us that we are all brothers and sisters. It is a call for peace and righteousness, transcending the boundaries that divide us and cause so much sorrow. It is a "joyous gathering with dharma dance." Let us carry the universal message and vision of the

Obon with us, lighting up our lives and our communities with the inclusive sense of our common destiny.

* Thank you, Dr. Alfred Bloom, for inspiring me to write the above essay by your beautiful article, "The Universalization of Obon."

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