

Shoyo Sensei's Dharma Message:

Thoughts On Obon:

How Did Moggallana and Sariputta Rescue their Mothers from the Hungry Ghost Realm?

In one of the oldest Buddhist texts called the Anguttara Nikaya in the Pali Canon, the oldest extant Buddhist texts, there is a short sutra called "Repaying One's Parents." (A. II. IV. 2.)

I declare, O disciples, that there are two persons one can never repay. What two? One's mother and father.

Even if one should carry about one's mother on one shoulder and one's father on the other, and while doing so should live a hundred years, reach the age of a hundred years; and if one should attend to them by anointing them with salves, by massaging, bathing and rubbing their limbs, and they should even void their excrements there -- even by that would one not do enough for one's parents, one would not repay them. Even if one were to establish one's parents as the supreme lords and rulers over this earth to rich in the seven treasures, one would not do enough for them, one would not repay them. What is the reason for this? Parents do much for their children: they bring them up, feed them and guide them through this world.

But, O disciples, one who encourages one's unbelieving parents, settles and establishes them in faith; who encourages one's immoral parents, settles and establishes them in virtue; who encourages one's stingy parents, settles and established them in generosity; who encourages one's ignorant parents, settles and establishes them in wisdom -- such a one, O disciples, does enough for one's parents: one repays them and more than repays them for what they have done. A. II. IV. 2.

The sutra tells us the extreme difficulty of repaying our thankfulness to our parents. Indeed, when we were born, we were just like a fresh piece of flesh: urinating, defecating, sucking, crying and sleeping in a crib. Owing to the indescribably tremendous care, love, compassion, insight, effort, energy, and time of our mother and father, we are now able to do so many things. Parents have been our very first and best teachers and caretakers. It may be surprising for some people, who believe that the importance of filial piety started in China, to find such a sutra in the Pali Canon. In some Buddhist countries like Sri Lanka, I have witnessed that children actually give a total bow to their parents every morning and evening, just like they may do to the Buddha. The only difference one finds in the Pali texts is the order of "mother" and "father": In the Pali texts, parents are always expressed as mother first and then father. But, the Chinese text switched its order, thus, they say father first and then mother in talking about parents.

Repaying one's parents is indeed impossible. But, says the Buddha, there is only one way that one could repay, to introduce Buddha-Dharma to one's parents:

1) Encourage one's unbelieving parents, settled and established them in faith; 2) Encourage one's immoral parents, settled and established them in virtue; 3) Encourage one's stingy parents, settled and established them in generosity; 4) Encourage one's ignorant parents, settled and established them in wisdom.

Obon is the time to re-listen to the story of Moggallana and his mother. The story in the *Ullambana Sutra* tells us that Moggallana's mother, who was then suffering as a hungry ghost in the Hungry Ghost Realm, was rescued by her son to be born in a heavenly realm. Hungry ghosts are said to be full of anger, hatred and greed, and thereby, in extreme pain and suffering.

It has been widely believed that the story was created by the Chinese Buddhists, since it fits in with their own culture, particularly with Confucianism, promoting the Confucian idea of worshipping one's parents and ancestors. As a result, the *Ullambana Sutra* also has been called "apocryphal" meaning not the genuine sutra that Sakyamuni Buddha himself taught in India.

Surprisingly, however, I found a very similar sutra to the “*Ullambana Sutra*” in the Pali canon, called “*Sariputtatheramatupetivatthuvannana*” (Exposition of the Elder Sariputta’s Mother Peti Story). According to this text, it is Sariputta’s mother who was saved from the hungry ghost realm. The “*Ullambana Sutra*” and “*Sariputtatheramatupetivatthuvannana*” are almost identical in sharing the rescue story of their hungry ghost mothers.

How did Moggallana and Sariputta rescue their mothers respectively?

They were the two top disciples of the Buddha: the former was the top disciple in activating the super-natural power and the latter was the top disciple in working with the highest wisdom next to the Buddha. Then, you may think that they rescued their mothers by utilizing the very special supernatural power or the highest wisdom. But, actually their special powers could not rescue his mother. His super power did not work. Thus, Moggallana went to the Buddha for advice, while Sariputta went to his friend Moggallana when he wanted to rescue his mother as a hungry ghost. It implies that Moggallana’s success story was known to Sariputta by then.

What both did for their respective mothers was to conducted the “Dharma Works” (or *Hoji / Hoyo* in Japanese, which is widely and casually translated to “memorial services” in English). When they thought of their mothers with the greatest care, loving-kindness, appreciation, tender heart, and compassion during the Dharma Work (*Hoji / Hoyo*), each mother was immediately filled with joy, gratitude and a happy mind. Moggallana’s and Sariputta’s positive energy of caring and compassion for their mothers immediately reached them. Then, these mothers immediately responded to their sons’ hearts respectively and showed a great appreciation for them. At that moment, these mothers were saved from the realm of hungry ghosts. What saved their mothers was the positive power of mind. By conducting Dharma Work, Moggallana and Sariputta indeed repaid their parents.

Dharma Work for the deceased is very important. It consists of the following four works: To thank our beloved ones for sharing their wonderful human lives. To look back at their beautiful virtues and personalities so that we can look at our own ways of living with reflection. To learn the impermanence of life and to be ready to accept the reality of life and death. To thank innumerable causes and conditions that allow us to live at this moment.

The stories reveal that even a momentary period of loving-kindness, compassion, caring, and wisdom (which is equal to non-anger, non-greed, or non-hatred) rescued even the hungry ghost mothers who were full of anger, greed and hatred. Anger, for example, is a very powerful energy, but loving-kindness, wisdom and compassion are much more powerful than anger and can cancel any negative states. At the moment when joy and thankfulness were generated in hungry ghost mothers, they were saved.

But, this is neither especially surprising nor surprising mystic. This is what we experience in our daily life. Those whom you do not like quite often do not like you either. It is because they receive your negative mind which generates in your mind being un-awared. Then, it is not surprising when your positive and happy mind is received by others, and they also immediately generate positive and happy mind in themselves. We all know that even animals can receive our positive or negative mental activities. Moggallana and Sariputta rescued their mothers not because they were special people, but because the Work of Dharma make their mothers’ minds warm and thankful.

Happiness, Joy and Gentle Heart and Less Selfishness go hand in hand.

Selfless action and Happiness go hand in hand.

Stress and Selfishness go hand in hand.

When Stress is 80, Ego is also 80. When Ego is 20, Stress is also 20.

Dharma is after all these insightful information on the causal conditional relationship between action and its reaction. Temple is the place that offers this information on Dharma.

If you lost your beloved one since last Obon, remember his or her only one wish is your happiness and joy. He or she never wishes to be a cause of your grief, sadness, or painful suffering. You have to be joyous and positive. It is important and meaningful that in Jodo Shinshu, Obon is called “Day of Rejoice.”

In the Zen tradition, foods are offered to save hungry ghosts. But, it is clear that it is not foods or offerings that save the hungry ghosts. It is positive and joyful heart and mind. According to a recent report from the psychology research,

