

Obon Festival – Living and Dying in Buddhism

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The Obon observance has deep roots in Asian ancestor cult from India to Japan. It is based on the legend of the monk Mogallana's rescue of his mother from the hell of hungry ghosts. The story dramatizes the son's anxiety for his mother's welfare after her death and how it was resolved through Buddhist practice.

Practicing meditation, Mogallana gained spiritual insight and vision, which enabled him to see his mother's true condition. He then asked the Buddha how to free her from her suffering. The Buddha advised him to practice compassion and to give offerings to the monks. When his mother was released, Mogallana danced for joy. His response is regarded as the origin of the Bon dance.

A variety of questions can be raised about this story. Why was the mother in hell? Where was the father? How was she ransomed? What is the nature of meditation? What is the significance of Obon for Buddhism? Briefly, it appears that the mother is the focus of the story which is shaped by the patriarchal perspective that dominates all religious traditions, namely the view that women are the source of problems and regarded as inferior to men. In ancient Buddhist tradition women were considered to be more worldly and selfish than men, because they have deep family attachments, putting their children and family before anything else. We need to consider this carefully.

Mothers worldwide are devoted to their children. They will do anything for them to protect and provide for their welfare. Mothers engage in superstitious practices to keep their children safe and healthy. The selfishness of women, from a monkish point of view, is that they put the family above and before anything else, before even attending to their own spiritual welfare which would mean giving up the world and any form of attachment. In ancient patriarchal societies, such as India, men, on reaching an advanced age and after fulfilling their social obligations, could devote themselves totally to the pursuit of enlightenment. However, women had to submit to the authority of their fathers, husbands and eldest sons throughout their lives, never having the opportunity for such pursuits.

The way to the mother's liberation from hell was through offerings which appear to be a ransom. One might see it as a means for the temples to raise money to maintain themselves. Services for the dead have been a major source of support for Buddhist temples and have focused the religion on death. In recent years the term Funeral Buddhism was current in Japan. It was through the transfer of merit from good deeds done by the living that Mogallana's mother and other loved ones were able to be freed from hell. This principle is still widely held today.

Mogallana came to see the suffering of his mother through the practice of meditation. In contrast to modern people who view meditation as a source of peace of mind and happiness, devotees of Buddhism and other traditions also believe that meditation will bring them wisdom and spiritual power. In Buddhist tradition a skilled meditator can gain supernormal powers such as the ability to see past lives and know the future. Through meditation one can alter reality. Mogallana's visualization of hell made it possible to change reality for his mother.

Another implication of the story relates to the principle of retribution for failing to treat the dead properly which is current all through Asian religions and Buddhism. Various forms of disaster and punishment may result from neglect of the dead. It has been said that a person is more dangerous dead than alive, because angry spirits may haunt the living.

However, in this story we can observe that Mogallana's mother does not return to harm her son because he had not liberated her from hell. It was his effort and spiritual insight that finally liberated her. We should take note that Buddhism does not threaten people with such retribution for their failures, but advocates a constant concern for the well-being of all beings, whether dead or alive.

The story itself originated in ancient India and by way of China came to influence Japanese Buddhism from earliest times. Prince Shotoku established it as a major festival in Japan in the 7th century, together with Hanamatsuri which commemorates the birth of Sakyamuni Buddha. It was to be held on the 15th day of the 7th month in the lunar calendar. With the onset of the Meiji period and shift to the solar calendar Obon became July 15 and in some places August 15. Hanamatsuri became April 8.

These festivals marked central concerns of ancient agrarian Japanese: ancestors and fertility. Because the ancestor cult was so prevalent in Japan, all traditions had to include such practices in their services. This can be seen clearly even in Shin Buddhism where Shinran had declared that he never said Nembutsu once out of filial piety for his parents. Nevertheless, Shin Buddhism developed memorial services to show respect for the ancestors. After Shinran, the third Abbot Kakunyo had counseled members not to make the funeral the central event in Shin Buddhism. Yet like other sects funerals became a prominent feature among the temple religious services. Shinran went so far as to disregard special treatment for the dead when he declared that his body was to be thrown into the Kamo river as food for the fish.

Shinran rejected the concept of ransom or transfer of merit to liberate the dead. He trusted in the absolute, boundless compassion of Amida Buddha to bring all beings to enlightenment no matter how evil they have been. Nevertheless, Shin Buddhism reinterpreted the services for the dead to respond to the need for spiritual consolation in such critical moments. The emphasis in the services is how the deceased has benefited our lives and expressed the compassion of Amida Buddha.

The purpose of religious life for Shinran is to express gratitude for the great gift of life and for those who share it with us.

For Shin Buddhism, as well as other sects, the Buddha's compassion reaches us in many ways, through nature, family and community. According to Shin belief, rather than we liberating the ancestors as in the story, it is the ancestors who liberate us through their love and compassion in life.

Though we focus on this aspect of life once in the year, it is really a matter for everyday reflection. According to Japanese tradition, the ancestors return to commune with their descendants during this season. However, in actuality, the ancestors, our parents and loved ones, as well as the many others who shape our modern life, have never left. We live in the light of their contributions. Obon is consequently a time for recognizing our responsibility to life and not merely the marking of death and separation.

The spirit of Obon expresses our awareness of our connectedness to others in the web of human life and nature which provide the foundations for our spiritual life. It challenges us to nurture our faith and encourage a sense of responsibility and humility in our responses to the awesome questions of life and death emerging from our technocratic culture. As a sangha, a spiritual community, and as individuals, we should seek the flexibility and compassion that will enhance the life of all people.