

# ***Obon: A Festival of Memory***

**by Dr. Alfred Bloom, Emeritus Professor, University of Hawaii**

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The Obon commemoration is one of the most significant events in the ritual calendar of Buddhism in East Asia. It is a time for families to recall the recent passing of a loved one and the ancestors from generations before.

In the case of the recently bereaved, the grieving process may only just be completed and the memories of their loved one are fresh in their minds. Because our memories play such a great role particularly at the time of Obon, I call this observance a "Festival of Memory" because it is during this season that we remember and celebrate the lives of all our departed loved ones who have nurtured, influenced and shaped our lives, whether family or friends, over the generations and the years.

While for many it is an especially sad time, it is also an occasion for recollecting our heritage, for appreciating the benefits we have received materially, as well as spiritually, from our parents, families and community. We contemplate the social and cultural advantages which we possess in our freedoms, and our faith. It is a time for recalling the Buddhist teachings which enable us to understand life and give us hope for the future.

Human beings are animals biologically. Our bodies function like other animals and we have similar needs for food, shelter, and preservation of the species. It has been said that human beings are merely forked animals. Nevertheless, we have abilities that separate us from the larger mass of animals. We walk upright. Our hands make possible the use of tools.

More important we have the abilities to reason, remember and communicate in speech or writing. Philosophers have generally regarded reason as the primary feature of being human, since they focus on reason in their discussions. Nevertheless, it is really memory that makes human life possible. Today, as we face the awful and awesome Alzheimer's disease, we see the absolutely devastating result of the loss of memory and with it the loss of significant connections. We all know someone who has experienced this degrading disease, degrading for the individual who was once vibrant with life and memories, and for the family members who must face the gradual decline and virtual disappearance of the person.

Without memory, reason cannot function and communication becomes impossible. On the broad scope, when we compare with other animals, only human beings produce culture, arts, science philosophy and religion. Memory means that we learn from experience, and this knowledge can be handed on from generation to generation. Knowledge can be increased through the ages, refining and improving life. Our modern civilization has emerged today and continues to develop as a result of the accumulated experiences and memories of countless generations of scholars, teachers and explorers. The key to everything human is memory.

Shinran, founder of the Hongwanji tradition, recognized the importance of memory. He constantly recalled his indebtedness and obligation to his predecessors in the Dharma whose teachings and insights opened the path of faith for him. He left his memories in his collection of writings where he constantly draws upon the insights of his predecessors in the Pure Land Buddhist tradition. Shinran constantly recalled the compassion of the Buddha and the great teachers who shared the Dharma with the people of their ages, while leaving their writings for later generations. In the preface of his major work, the "**The Treatise on Teaching, Practice, Faith and Realization** (*Kyogyoshinsho*)" Shinran exclaimed:

"How joyous I am, Gutoku Shinran, disciple of Sakyamuni! Rare is it to come upon the sacred scriptures from the westward land of India and the commentaries of the master of China and Japan, but now I have been able to encounter them. Rare it is to hear them, but already I have been able to hear. Reverently entrusting myself to the teaching, practice, and realization that are the true essence of the Pure Land way, I am especially aware of the profundity of the Tathagata's benevolence. Here I rejoice in what I have heard and extol what I have attained."

In Buddhism, every tradition organizes its memories of the past and represented in the lineage which clarifies the heritage of that school. As a consequence of Shinran's memory of the past, he organized Pure Land history around seven great teachers, spanning India, China and Japan. These were Nagarjuna and Vasubandhu in India, Donran, Doshaku and Zendo in China and Genshin and Honen in Japan. Each teacher contributed a significant insight that inspired and shaped the Pure Land tradition, as well as Shinran's own understanding.

In gratitude for what he had learned he composed the *Hymn on the Nembutsu of True Faith*. The Chinese teacher Donran declared that the bodhisattva, the person aspiring to Buddhahood, "is aware of the Buddha's benevolence and responds in gratitude to his virtue." In the conclusion of his treatise, Shinran exults:

"I am deeply aware of the Tathagata's immense compassion, and I sincerely revere the benevolent care behind the master's teaching activity. My joy grows even fuller, my gratitude and indebtedness ever more compelling. Therefore, I have selected [passages expressing] the core of the Pure Land way and gathered here its essentials."

Above all, Shinran remembered Honen, his direct teacher, who led him to the deeper understanding of Amida Buddha's Vow. Through Honen, Shinran achieved the trust and spiritual peace for which he had struggled fruitlessly for twenty years in the Tendai monastery on Mount Hiei.

Shinran came to realize that, as he said, "Amida's Vow was made for me, Shinran, alone." Inspired by his personal realization, he undertook to share the Dharma and assist others to experience the same realization. While the way of faith is often regarded as a way for weak people, Shinran saw that it was a source of strength. Taking his guide from the pioneers of faith he was able to face the many challenges of the world in which he lived. Remembering the past is the doorway to the future.

For Shinran and other Buddhist teachers memory expresses itself in gratitude. Remembering and gratitude are the heart and essence of religious faith. Without memory, there is no gratitude, no devotion, no commitment. Gratitude gives shape and reality to memory. We may recall that Nichiren wrote an essay on "The Four Debts of Gratitude" -- to one's father and mother, to all sentient beings, to the ruler of the country (rather than a specific "ruler" as in ancient times, we might view this today as our natural and social environment), and to the Three Treasures [Buddha, Dharma and Sangha]. When we are grateful, the past, our predecessors, our parents and friends all gain new life as they once again live in and through us. Shinran expressed his understanding poignantly in the *Hymn of Grateful Dedication*:

Such is the benevolence of the Tathagata's great  
Compassion,  
That we must strive to return it, even to the breaking of  
our bodies;  
Such is the benevolence of the masters and true teachers,  
That we must endeavor to repay it, even to our bones'  
becoming dust.

Gratitude is the recognition of the interconnectedness of all things, what we call interdependence in Buddhism. It is the awareness that our lives are like a tapestry with many threads of various colors and patterns that make up the design of our life tapestry. We are part of the great chain of life and our existence represents the focal point of many factors coming together from nature, our parents and our community. There is an old folk tale about a fox who stole some milk from a farmer. The farmer cut off his tail as punishment. When the fox asked for the tail back, the farmer said, he could have it, if he would give back the milk. So he goes to the cow for milk and the cow says, bring me some grass, and the grass said, bring me some water, and the stream said give me a jug. The list goes on and on until finally, he was able to fulfill all the requests and get his tail back. The story indicates that we are part of a vast system of life and nature and do not live isolated and independent.

We are grateful for our ancestors, the teachings, and the life we receive through nature. We are a node in the web of life, receiving both its benefits and support. We also have the responsibility to support the web. In Pure Land terms, gratitude is the other side of the understanding of Other Power. It is the recognition that whatever we do is done through and by others.

Obon is a time of remembering our departed loved ones. It causes us to reflect on our own life, its fragility and fleeting character. Many people are concerned for their survival after death. This is an important issue. However, our real survival after death and those of our loved ones is achieved when we share our memories, faith and dedication with those that follow us. Physically we share our genes and heredity. More important is the spiritual and intellectual influence that we have on the values and thought of our family members and friends. We all live on through the lives of those who follow and keep the memories fresh.

In traditional Japanese Obon in Japan, it has been believed that the spirits of the dead come back from the world of the dead to us to assist the fertility and growth of crops by bringing rain. The festival was to see them off again with the lanterns and *toro nagashi* ritual, in order to light their way to the other world for another year. In a deep sense, the ancestors have never returned, nor have they ever really departed. They are always enshrined in our memories and embodied in our thoughts, words and deeds. Obon, as a time for rededication to the spirit of those gone before, we give them new life by acknowledging their influence and presence in our lives. Above all, it is an occasion for recalling the compassion and wisdom of the Buddha, which gave vitality to the faith of those who have gone before. When we do this, Obon will truly be a festival of memory.