

A Japanese Priest's Obon

by Rev. Daien (Tsutomu) Haseo

Rev. Daien (Tsutomu) Haseo is the resident minister (jushoku) of a Yokohama area temple in Japan. This reflective account of his Obon activities illustrates how hard Japanese priests work to bring spiritual meaning to temple members' lives.

Obon is one of the folk beliefs in Japan with long-held traditions. Souls of the deceased members of families are believed to be returning home during this period. Thus, people visit their family graves to guide those souls (or spirits) into their homes at the very beginning of the period of Obon and send these souls back to their family graves at Obon's end. You can see this phenomenon in rural areas more clearly.

Many people (families, relatives and even friends of the deceased) do *omairi* (visiting of ancestors' graves or the temple) at the *Hondo* (main hall of the temple) and their family graves in the temple cemetery.

Every year approximately 150 people meet at our temple on the day of the service for Obon. (We are now scheduled to have the Obon gathering – called '*Bon-Ko*' – in our area on Sunday, August 8.) We chant *Amidakyo* together, which is followed by the reading of a letter of Rennyō, and a sermon that I give for less than half an hour (because it's too hot with no air-conditioner working at our *Hondo*), and a closing statement by my father.

After confirming with some of the parishioners the timing of my visit to their homes for private services on this day during the period of Obon (that starts from August 13), I take a car to visit those homes one after another, while my father walks in the hot summer to visit the homes of those who live near to the temple. Out of their ancestral reverence, they all think it is highly important that the *jushoku* (resident minister) of their *bodaiji* (ancestral or family temple) visit their homes during Obon to provide the service in front of their family altars. If we ever forget any of these places, we will immediately get a call requesting the service – or, asking why they were missed.

At some homes, there is a large gathering with brothers and sisters and relatives all getting together. When I arrive, I see a big table filled with many dishes (sashimi, sushi, tempura, noodles, vegetables, tofu, etc.) and many bottles of beer, sake, and even whiskey. Right after the service, thinking I must be very hungry and thirsty they strongly urge me to eat some of those foods and drink a glass of beer. However, I can't because I still have a lot of places to visit within a short period of time. As you can easily imagine, I'm exhausted upon completion of providing all of these services.

Yet, Obon is a chance for *jushoku* to visit with *monshinto* (parishioners) and have conversations with the members of their families, especially with those who are too old to visit the temple. Thus, I highly value this time and enjoy meeting with people in their homes.

Our temple does not sponsor Bon dances but a local community does. My wife used to take our son and daughter to the Bon dancing festival at a local park. They usually serve foods that kids like to eat and offer games kids like to play, in addition to bon dancing. [Tsukiji Betsuin](#) sponsors bon dances every year.

Obon offers Buddhist priests a special opportunity to get directly involved in people's lives. People working in urban areas return to their home countries to get together with family and friends, making the week of Obon one of the busiest times for travel as flights, trains,

and roads are all congested. The Government offices and most companies are closed during this period and downtown Tokyo gets very quiet.

A funny thing is that people are very serious about bringing a paper lantern (*chochin*) with them to their family graves so that the souls of their ancestors may not get lost on their way back home.

At one of the homes I visit, a very old woman in her 90s fans me while I chant a sutra in front of the family altar. At another home, right after I finish chanting, they open a large bottle of cold beer so they can start having casual conversation with the *jushoku* of their *bodaiji* over drinks. People don't expect me to say "no" because of a fear that this might lead to drunk driving, so Obon is not only the busiest time but a dangerous time for Buddhist priests as well. Once when I declined another round of beer, they immediately responded that I could easily drive back to the temple which was close to their home even if I was asleep!

Anyway, at most of the homes I visit, all family members sit down together right behind me in front of the family altar. They listen very seriously to the sutra that I chant, whether they understand it or not.

Since in the teachings of Shin Buddhism Obon itself is nothing special but provides one of the opportunities for listening to the Buddha Dharma, there is no reason to do something special for it. In traditions other than Shin Buddhism, however, Obon is a special, fancier and more serious event for people to welcome their ancestors back home.

Despite the difference in traditions, Obon is taken as an opportunity for all family members, including small children, to get together, have fun, and reaffirm their family ties.