

Temple Life

by Rev. Haseo Tsutomu

In this account Rev. Haseo Tsutomu (Daien) describes the life of a minister-priest in his temple. He shows how challenging and demanding such service is in dealing with human problems of living and dying.

What is good to me is that I have no problems with doing 'Otsutome' at the Hondo of our temple every morning and every evening. Chanting sutras to praise the virtue of Amida Buddha, and reciting the nembutsu to express gratitude for the process of interdependence at the end of Otsutome makes me feel great!

Working at a temple like Betsuin (*a head temple in a district*) is quite different from running a temple as the Jushoku (*resident minister in a local temple*). It is like a doctor working at a big hospital with all the systems to support his work in place (*as a salaried employee*) as compared with a doctor running his own clinic as self-employed. In Japan, sons and daughters, who were born to Buddhist temples, though not all of them, work at Betsuin or Honzan (*mother temple in Kyoto*) to learn and build experience for some years when they are young before they return to their temples. They are underpaid, but they can take days off easily to go back and help their Jushoku to provide services for Obon, Hoonko or funerals because their colleagues all understand what the temple work is all about.

Buddhist temples used to be functioning as schools called 'Terakoya' for local, small children back in old days in Japan. The Jushoku was the most knowledgeable person in the local community at that time, naming children, and teaching them how to read and write. Thus, education is the function that Buddhist temples played originally. I know many part-time Jushoku are school teachers as they can not afford to make a living and educate their children as a full-time Jushoku. This is prominent in rural areas.

In the meantime, the funeral service that I provided right after the service for Obon at our temple was indeed a big deal and time-consuming one. In Japan, more than 80% of people die at hospitals, and funerals are arranged by undertakers (or morticians) who subcontract with the hospitals. The funeral services are in most cases held at the facilities owned by those undertakers that are located with relatively easy access from train and/or subway stations. After cremation, the memorial of the first 7th day after death is conducted at the same place as the funeral for the convenience of mourners and the burial of ashes is usually done at the memorial of the 49th day after death into the family grave of the deceased. This is the most popular course of actions associated with funerals in Japan nowadays. A series of those actions are led by undertakers, who are specialized in funeral services, to ensure that things go smoothly without fail.

With the one I was involved in last week, however, it was quite different from the above.

First, when a notice of the death of a 89-year-old man, who died at his home, was made to the public, a group of people, who are relatives and/or neighbors, were formed to decide who plays what roles, etc. in details. Then, they visit homes in the local areas to a certain scope one after another asking for helping hands from each of these homes for the funeral of the deceased. Some people clean and prepare for the funeral to be held at the house of the deceased (this includes the moving of furnitures to accommodate many mourners, in addition to the space for a coffin right in front of the altar. Some people clean the grave of the family of the deceased on behalf of them as the burial of ashes is done after cremation on the same day as the funeral. Housewives from those homes put aprons on, get together at the home of the deceased, and are ready to help. Even if you have work to do at a

company, you must take days off for this particular event otherwise you will no longer be regarded as a member of the local community.

Although many people are called to provide their helping hands for the funeral for several days, they do not find things to do because an undertaker is still there preparing for the funeral. You may find this totally unproductive, inefficient and a waste of time in a modern day Japan. Obviously, this is the custom with a long tradition that modern people still maintain from the old days when corpse was buried into the ground without cremation (which requires a lot of labor back in those old days). While you rarely find the burial of corpse into the ground without cremation in urban areas, it still exists in small villages in rural areas though such case is less than 1% in Japan nowadays.

Thus, it was a time-consuming process for those who attended this type of funeral ranging from preparations, *otsuya* (wake service), funeral, cremation, burial of ashes, to the memorial for the first 7th day from death, and then a big dinner for everyone who helped to get the funeral successfully completed at the home of the deceased. After the *Jushoku* finishes dinner and returns to the temple, a group of local people recite the *nembutsu* altogether in their own style repeatedly for long time for the family of the deceased in our area. It is a long day with a long evening. This is quite unusual.