

DHARMA MESSAGE

“Where is Maudgalyayana?”

By Hiroshi Abiko

The Obon season is now with us. Particularly in Japan, irrespective of religion, its importance as a holiday is second to none, along with New Year. For centuries, Obon season is often called Chu-gen or “Middle New Year”. With Buddha-Dharma Names of beloved who passed away since the last year’s Obon, written on a paper, card, tablet called Ihai, or on paper lantern, are presented in the altar. Here at Hompa Hongwanji, we host that special service called Hatsubon on July 10th and 11th. This Obon brings particular meaning to the “Gathering of Joy”, another name for Obon. I am looking forward to this special service for it is first Obon since the passing of my father last November.

Obon or its unabridged form Ura-bon is the transliteration of the original Sanskrit Ullambana or “hanging upside down”. Buddhists, from its origin, intended to remove such grief and discomfort as Ullambana from the self as well as from those whose efforts make the self possible. Of course, it is one thing to gain freedom, but it is another to recognize what one needs to be freed from. Often times, the process of gaining freedom results in more self-help and ego-inflating.

The origin of Obon is usually ascribed to the legend of Maudgalyayana, in the Ullambana Sutra. According to the scripture, there was a disciple of Buddha by the name of Maudgalyayana, Mokuren in Japanese, among the outstanding followers. Literature tells that he was endowed with deep power to see any happenings in the Three Thousand Worlds, or 3000 modes of existence. One day, as he cast a glance into the world of hunger, to his astonishment, he found his beloved, departed mother being tortured by hunger and thirst. Shuddering at this pitiful scene, he sent a bowl of rice to her, but as soon as her lips touched the food, it burst into flame. Immediately he gave her some water, but the result was opposite, the flame became larger and hotter. In his helplessness, he became aware that because of him, the mother was in intense suffering. Weeping and screaming, Maudgalyayana sought his teacher Buddha to ask what to do. The Buddha’s answer was “Even your sincere filial piety, you are not able to help your mother who has been reaping the effects of her own deeds in her previous lives. The only way left for us is to show the deepest sincerity humanly possible.” Maudgalyayana’s exertion of highest loving-kindness, through pure Dana, is depicted in the scripture as climaxing in the final deliverance of his beloved mother. As many of you may know already, the Bon-dance is ascribed to this exultation of Maudgalyayana’s mother and her co-habitants to exit from the realm of hunger and thirst.

Now reading this legend, different interpretations are possible. If our question to this story is literal, the answer will be literal and we may learn many Buddhistic teachings, i.e., practice of pure giving, the love of one’s parent and Buddha’s Compassion. The second step of interpretation is to understand that the pitiful story of Maudgalyayana’s mother was a projection of what was innermost in the son himself, of impermanence, of desire to satiate endlessly, etc.

The third step is an acceptance of the legend as a teaching for us that Maudgalyayana is not a person in remote place and time but here and now. Furthermore, he is no different from us. Each step of interpretation is meaningful but a true Buddhist strives towards the third from the first. “Who is Maudgalyayana? Where is he?” is a constant quest of Buddhists in the past and in the present. To those whose quest is real and close, the final step culminating in entrusting the Vow of Amida would be true. As we read in the Jodoshinshu classic, Shinran Shonin speaks that “Amida’s Vow is only for myself!” This does not point to his arrogance, rather, it points to most sincere look into the self.

Our longing for what we are bereft of is beautifully expressed in the Obon song:

Obon is a joyous season,
On these days, My beloved ones
Who have departed,
Even they return to us on this place.

The ‘joy’ is not, of course, ordinary, shallow-rooted one but unshakable source of deep trust. This is the unmovable condition of mind-heart effected from entrusting in Buddha and His Teaching.

In Gassho,

Rev. Hiroshi Abiko