



O-BON: WHAT IS REAL

O-Bon is always an awe-inspiring Buddhist ceremony, but this year it was particularly filled with wonder. The joyful, harmonious, enthusiastic preparations of some forty people working together for many days set the scene for the dynamic chanting of the Heart Sutra at the welcoming fire, which swirled with concentric energy as the spirits arrived. After the beautiful intensity of the O-Bon ceremony, a full “super moon” hovered closely over the lanterns that arrayed themselves in a long line along Beecher Lake’s other shore.

Mizu Segaki and O-Bon encourage us to break through the confining limitations of the rational, logical mind and open to the realm of mystery--the spirit world that is always present, but which we often ignore. Out of this ignorance, we tend to think the distractions and dissatisfactions of everyday life are real. But what are they actually? Mere shadows, phantasms, revolving around and augmenting the belief in a separate self, with all its dearly held views, prejudices, and opinions.

Although we may consider this tradition of O-Bon an esoteric one, all our ceremonial offerings and rituals are a way of purifying our hearts. Then we may come to realize that we are not at all separate--that what is real is our oneness with all beings past, present, and future.

It’s not just an esoteric Buddhist belief that we are inseparable or that space and time are illusory. The contemporary cosmologist Max Tegmark, in his book *Our Mathematical Universe: My Quest for the Ultimate Nature of Reality*, said, “Stars end their lives by blowing apart, recycling many of the atoms that they’ve made into gas clouds that can later form new stars, planets, and ultimately, you and me. In other words, we’re more connected to the heavens than our ancestors realized: we’re made of star stuff. Just as we are in our Universe, our Universe is in us.”

So when we chant Dai Segaki, which means “Boundless Offering to Hungry Ghosts,” we are acknowledging this essential connection, and we are acknowledging that all of us at one time or another are indeed Hungry Ghosts. We have brought affliction upon ourselves through our own greed, anger, and folly, through our habitual egocentricity. That is the Hungry Ghost condition. It arises out of ignorance of the reality of the universe: interbeing.

Some of what we chant in Dai Segaki is untranslatable; the syllables are in a language of cosmic wisdom, beyond conceptual thought and rational comprehension. Among the translatable parts is a prayer for those who have fallen into harmful ways, and whose karma has inevitably brought about hellish conditions--and as we have seen, this includes everyone.

Even here, in this paradise known as Great Bodhisattva Mountain, our self-centered, complaining minds can create a hell realm. We may think our various complaints are justified--that situations and circumstances are unfair, that others should change according to our way of seeing things. When we believe our own narratives, we react accordingly.

(see next page)

As Eknath Easwaren put it, "The real significance of hell is that it is a mental state caused by the content of a person's own thoughts and actions. Wrong actions bring their own punishment, whether from within or from without, or most tragically, by damaging one's hard-won spiritual progress."

Yet the good news of Buddhism is that suffering itself can drive us to deepen our practice and to awaken to our original Mind. John Milton, in *Paradise Lost*, wrote, "The mind is its own place, and in itself / Can make a heaven of hell or hell of heaven."

So it's up to us. We can continue to tighten the noose-hold of the ego, or we can, through our moment-after-moment, breath-after-breath attentiveness and awareness, realize the fact of our interconnectedness.

Even when confronted with huge obstacles--serious health issues, the loss of loved ones, complex legal and financial problems, difficult family situations, career setbacks--when our practice is strong, we can return to our essential oneness. By simply exhaling "One..." completely, everything changes; we enter into vast boundlessness.

Instead of irritation and frustration, we feel compassion. Instead of seeking retribution, we experience inner grace and harmony, which lead to mutual understanding and resolution. Thus our bodhisattva vow is reaffirmed. This brings about the consummate openheartedness of which William Blake wrote: "Love seeketh not itself to please, / nor for itself hath any care, / but for another gives its ease, / and builds a Heaven in Hell's despair."

This love is universal. It has no strings, no attachments. It is none other than overwhelming gratitude for all we have been given--starting with having been given life.

The more we do strong, dedicated zazen, the more we feel such gratitude. And this gratitude brings a natural actualization of the first paramita (or "perfection")--that is, dana. Giving. Instead of thinking, "What am I getting out of this?" we feel, "How can I repay all the kindnesses I've received?"

This is life-changing! Transformative! Sitting and chanting together, shouting "Mu..." in Sangha Meadow together, cooking and cleaning together, planting and harvesting and caring for the grounds together--we are the loving hosts to all hungry spirits in this life and all the many lives past and future. We are making offerings every day, in every way, giving of ourselves completely. May we all know the joy of a life of dana.