



O-Bon Dharma Talk, August 1, 2015

The moon was at its fullest the night of the opening fire and Mizu Segaki ceremony that begins O-Bon at Dai Bosatsu Zendo. As the flames leaped up toward the heavens, the tall trees surrounding us nodded, their leaves glittering in the last rays of the sun, shimmering in the breeze. The spirits were coming home. With the fire and our Heart Sutra chanting, we invited our loved ones back, and the next evening, during the O-Bon ceremony, we called their names.

Many who attended had lost dear family members, teachers, and friends during the past year, and it was our fervent wish that their profound grief might be somewhat assuaged through this ceremony, surrounded by everyone's loving-kindness and concern.

No matter how long it's been since our dear ones have passed, at O-Bon they are present, nourished not only by the meal so tenderly grown, harvested, and prepared, and the symbolic foods on the Segaki altars, but also by our vigorous recitation of the mystical syllables of the Great Compassionate Dharani and Dai Segaki, and by the fragrance and smoke of our incense offerings.

What is Dai Segaki? *Dai* means "vast, boundless"; *Segaki* means "offerings to those in the hungry-ghost realm." Although all of us have the rare karma to be born in human form, too often we think, speak, and act as if we are in the hungry-ghost realm of endless craving. Burdened with negative conditioning, we feel insecure, lacking, and unworthy, and seek some distraction, relationship, or substance that will provide a temporary fix, and then find ourselves even more broken.

Overloaded and fearful of being open to our pain, we run here and there, caught up in fantasies, collecting, accumulating -- and forgetting the healing and transformative power of silence and stillness. Not trusting our innate Buddha-nature, we strive ever more desperately to achieve and acquire what we think we need, what we think others think we need. In the midst of water, we cry in thirst so imploringly, as Hakuin Zenji put it.

But when we sit down and enter into this very moment, this very place; when we cease our wandering hither and yon, we can experience the profundity of the spirit world, which is always present, always supporting us, always encouraging us.

During morning zazen today, I became very aware of the presence of my brother, Jonathan, who was killed at the age of twenty, in July 1976, just fifteen days after this monastery was formally opened. Like me, he was born in the Year of the Sheep, when I was twelve; it was my responsibility to take care of him after school each day, so I remember him more as a

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little child than as a young man. He would be sixty now. But the presence I felt during zazen was ageless and formless -- pure benevolence, pure love.

Talk of the spirit world, and indeed the entire O-Bon ceremony, may seem too esoteric; some of you may think, "That's magical thinking, and I don't believe in magic." But really, no one is asking you to believe in anything.

This reminds me of a story my best friend and ex-husband Andy told. He was at work, on the night shift at a psychiatric emergency room. It was a slow night. One of the psychiatrists on duty said, "So, I understand you're a Buddhist." Uh-oh. "Yes . . ." "So do you believe in reincarnation?" Andy responded, "Do you believe in breathing?" The doctor said, "No, of course not, I don't believe in breathing; I just breathe." Andy said, "That's right."

So O-Bon is not about believing in something -- it's just seeing without the usual blinders over our eyes, just opening to what is all around us and through us. It's being aware of what the Diamond Sutra calls "inconceivable, unlimited." It's being this very moment, this very place: endless dimension universal life.

What we are present for is pure presence. It's not quantifiable. We can't even say we're one with it, because there's no "we" and no "it." Just the rustling of leaves, the full moon, the stillness of the lake, the eons eclipsed by the light of a single star. The proof is in the being, not the believing.

Yet most of us, at least some of the time, are governed by a dangerous cult, governed by a strong belief system. What is the god of this cult? The self. We bow down unconsciously to the demands of this god, which is quite imperious. There's an ongoing monologue of inner enslavement that goes, "I need." "I have to . . . I want to . . . How can I get . . .?"

So what we do believe in, this separate self, offers a lifelong warranty, a guarantee, called *dukkha*. Misery. Dissatisfaction. Dis-ease and disease. We get accustomed to its dictates, so much so that we don't even notice when we are imbibing and spewing out the three poisons: greed, anger, and folly.

Eventually, the karmic results of this behavior get our attention. It's often when we hit a bottom of one sort or another that we begin serious Buddhist practice. Little by little, the brainwashing of the self-cult, so ingrained in our very culture -- get it? -- is seen for what it is. Little by little, we free ourselves to enter upon the bodhisattva path -- walking, stumbling, falling down, getting up, asking for forgiveness and forgiving, developing confidence and trust, giving love and receiving it.

At O-Bon, we come together in deep gratitude to all those who have cared for us, encouraged us, and inspired us in this precious life; and we vow to requite what we have received by committing to a life of transformation: from greed to generosity, from anger to loving-kindness, from folly to wisdom.

In the Metta Sutta, the Buddha says, "Just as a mother would protect her only child even at the risk of her own life, let one cultivate a boundless heart toward all beings. Let one's boundless love pervade the whole world."