

## **The Meaning of Obon**

By Rev. Kazuo Yamada

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Good morning, everyone. Today, we will perform the Obon service.

I'm sure that the spirits of your ancestors have been looking forward to this Obon service, because they know they will be receiving your prayers.

Before we begin, let me talk a little about Obon.

Obon has a long history, dating back more than 14 centuries to the Year 606 in Japan. During that long history, the Japanese have observed the occasion of Obon as a time to give ancestor blessings and prayers to unrested spirits who have fallen into the "hungry hell" lower realm of the spiritual world. This prayer to unrested spirits is symbolically connected to the Buddhist practice of giving alms.

I was born in the downtown area of Tokyo. As I child, at the start of the summer Bon Festival each year, my family would welcome our ancestral spirits in front of our home, and then we would go inside to hold prayer service for our ancestors. Also, our family members would go to the nearby river to offer food, flowers, candles, incense and our prayers for the unrested spirits.

As we returned from the river, my mother used to warn me: "Never look back, otherwise the unrested spirits will come calling on you." I would shiver with dread when she said this. Family members would return, taking different paths, so that the unrested spirits would not follow us home.

Each region in Japan observes different Obon customs, but for all Japanese, Obon is a festive occasion to spend a happy time with the family and welcome home ancestral spirits. In that sense, I think Obon shares some common features with the tradition of Day of the Dead Festival in Mexico, and with Halloween, which came from Northern Europe.

Bon originates from the story of Mokuren, a disciple of the Buddha. One day, Mokuren, who had exceptional psychic powers, perceived his deceased mother in the spiritual world. He was shocked to discover that she was suffering in the hell of hunger. He offered her a bowl of rice, but when she was about to consume it, the rice became flames and she could not eat.

Greatly disturbed, Mokuren sought the counsel of the Buddha, who said, "Your mother fell into the realm of hungry ghosts because of her selfishness and greed when she was alive. You must compensate for her sins by unselfishly giving to others on her behalf. "

The Buddha further instructed Mokuren to make offerings of food to the many Buddhist monks who would be completing their training period on July 15. This performance of alms giving would also be received by his mother.

Acting in accord with the Buddha's instructions, Mokuren dedicated food to the monks on July 15. The monks were overjoyed to receive these offerings. Their feelings of gratitude and joy were transmitted to his mother, who was able to eat and be released from her suffering.

Furthermore, Mokuren's mother was able to leave the hell of hunger and ascend to the higher realm of the spirit world through the benefit of the sutras, which were recited by the monks in gratitude for the food offered by Mokuren. Thus, the Bon service began.

Incidentally, it is believed that the Bon dance is the expression of joy given by Mokuren's mother in being able to ascend to the higher spiritual realm.

Therefore, in this Obon service, when we offer prayers to ancestors and unrested spirits, let us remember the lesson of Obon: "Unselfishly give something good to others." Of course, your ancestors will be pleased to receive your prayers, but prayers alone lack the important element of your own unselfish giving to others.

The Obon story has another important lesson. If you think only of yourself and your wants and needs while you are living, after physical death, your spirit will be unable to rest peacefully, because the mind of your soul is in disharmony with the Will of God. Your soul will remain trapped in the lower realm of the spiritual world, unable to give relief to your ancestors.

If, however, we benefit others while we are living, our souls will ascend to a higher, richer level, and our ancestors will be able to rest in peace.

Therefore, the essence of ancestor blessing is to strive to live our lives in a manner that is beneficial to others. Doing something good for the sake of others is not for others alone. Any act of benevolence inevitably rewards and enriches your own soul. This is the Universal Truth that Gedatsu Kongo taught us throughout his teachings.

Our Founder taught: "We are saved only to the degree that we save others." "We are given only as much as we have given." "For the sake of others is for the sake of yourself." "Observe the spirit of the sun, which gives without asking for anything in return."

When we look at the world of human relations today, we see only give and take. Giving and demanding in return. "I did this for him, but he didn't repay it." "Where is my reward?" Such is the state of dissatisfaction in human relations. Unless we change our attitude and stop looking for reward, conflicts and discord in human relations will never end.

The spirit of giving without asking for anything in return is Gedatsu.

Now, let us begin our Obon service and offer Amacha blessing for our ancestor spirits and unrested spirits. And let us earnestly resolve to give something good to others today.