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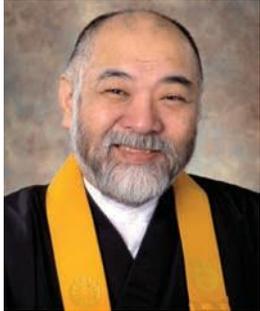
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“THE MORE WE GENUINELY CARE ABOUT OTHERS THE GREATER OWN OWN HAPPINESS & INNER PEACE”

REV. KAKEI NAKAGAWA, Rinban

REV. KAZ NAKATA



Black Lives Matter

On June 5th, I attended the joint vigil for Allies of the Black Lives Matter Movement, co-sponsored by the Unitarian Universalist Church of Fresno and Fresno Betsuin Buddhist Temple. Some church members also attended that day and the following June 12th vigil.



Obon Lanterns... bringing back the memories of our loved ones



Hello, all Central California Sangha friends! This is my fourth Newsletter article after the stay-at-home/shelter-in-place order was enacted. How you are adapting to your new normal life? I get up at 6:30 each morning to walk with my children. After a breakfast, I start my ministry activities such as writing emails and articles, reading books, making phone calls, attending virtual meetings, and preparing materials for Sunday Services. After the stay-at-home/shelter-in-place orders were lifted, I started accepting in-person meetings at the office. Since the orders were enacted, I conduct Sunday Service every weekend, and funeral/memorial Services upon request. Usually we suspend Sunday Services after Obon service and resume in September but for this year, Rinban and I decided to continue streaming Sunday Service throughout the summer. I do less driving to attend meetings or to conduct services, but I have more “deskwork” making posters and service programs. So, I keep myself active under the new normal life.

It is a citizens’ movement that seriously faces the unsolved problem of racism in American history, which originated from the cruel incident in Minneapolis, Minnesota. It is a positive movement for the Shin Buddhist Sangha in Central California, and we must be sure it never happens in others’ affairs.

The slogan of “Black Lives Matter” reminds us about the history of American African ancestry, which has taken the full brunt of discrimination for 400 years in this country. We will notice that racial-discrimination is the biggest shackle for preventing the ideal of America.

As Buddhists, we can never be indifferent.

Shin Buddhism is a way of life that is always with the Buddha’s wishes. Remember how Rennyō Shōnin taught a law of living as a Dharma-Practicer:

“I shall live my remaining life without prejudice or discrimination.

I shall discard false rituals and break the bonds of unproductive actions.

I shall long for and promote a world of non-violence whether physical, mental, cultural, or social.

I shall realize a true Sangha, where no individual would ever be impaired from realizing their full potential.”

What a resemblance between the Buddha’s wishes-for-the-world and America’s ideals! As D. T. Suzuki, one of the most beautiful Buddhist minds of the 20th century, clarified, “It can be asserted that there is no other country than the United States of America where Buddha’s wishes-for-the-world can be best fulfilled.”

In my previous article, I wrote on the significance of Obon for the Jodo Shinshu Sangha. On July 11th, we will have a virtual Obon Dance. I am currently preparing the equipment needed and preparing procedures for the event. When someone asks you about Obon, what do you recall? Maybe you recall Kimono, Obon Songs, Taiko, or Chicken Teriyaki. These are all important components of Obon. I personally, recall the Obon lanterns. You may remember that many colorful lanterns are fastened on the lines above. Once the sun sets, these lanterns are illuminated by lights or candles. Although it is very hot, dancers enjoy Obon odori under these lanterns. Some of these lanterns display people’s names on its surface. Many are of those loved ones who passed since the last Obon season. Traditionally, we call these the Hatsubon deceased. *Hatsu* means “first time” and *bon* means “Obon”. So Hatsubon means that the family of the deceased is observing Obon for the first time, without their loved one. You may wonder why we use lanterns. There are many old traditions regarding the Obon lantern so I would like to introduce one of the Jodo Shinshu stories on the Obon lantern.

Continued, page 2

Continued, page 2

Rev. Nakagawa, continued

This is true especially for people of American Japanese ancestry who have experienced the horror of the moment of being one step before racial extinction, due to the discrimination policy of the Federal Government during WWII.

We must not keep silent.

The following poem is written on the tombstone of one Polish man, Martin Niemoller, who died during World War II:

“First they came and knocked on the door for the socialists, and I did not speak out—

Because I was not a socialist.

Then they came and knocked on the door for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out—

Because I was not a trade unionist.

Then they came and knocked on the door for the Jews, and I did not speak out—

Because I was not a Jew.

Then they came and knocked on the door for me—

And there was no one left to speak for me.”

Thankfully, when the *Issei* and *Nisei* were in the internment camps, there were quite a few in this country who spoke up for us and spoke for our human rights, even by risking their social status. They are the original Americans. We must never forget about these people.

And even now in the 21st century, they are knocking on our doors for people of American African ancestry, 150 years after the Emancipation Proclamation, basically because of the difference in skin color.....

May we speak strong for establishing the society where no individual would ever be impaired from realizing their full potential.



Please view, join & participate in the
July VIRTUAL services on Twitter:

July 5 @ 10AM - CC Combined Shotsuki Service

July 11 @ 5:30PM - CC Hatsubon Service and
Virtual Obon Odori

July 12 @ 10AM - CC Combined Obon Service

July 19 @ 10AM - Dharma Family Service

July 26 @ 10AM - Dharma Family Service

Rev. Kaz, continued

But before sharing this, we should know the history of a lantern in the Buddhist tradition. A lantern is known as *Toro*, in Japanese or Chinese. It literally means “a basket for a candle”. According to the *Mahāsāka-vinaya* (ancient precepts for Buddhist monks), originally monks were using an open-flame light. They realized that this may cause a fire, so the vinaya text permitted monks to make a basket for the candle, made from copper, iron, clay brick, or wood. In the *Vinaya-ksudraka-vastu* (another ancient precept for Buddhist monks), it says a monk was chanting a sutra one night. He was using an open flame for his source of light. A bug flew over his flame and was killed. He decided to make a basket with bamboo sticks for a covering to avoid such unnecessary killing. So originally a lantern was not a part of the Buddhist ornaments. Later in China, lanterns were used to light up a temple altar, and placed in front of a temple building as a stone structured lantern. Nowadays, you may see these stone lanterns as decoration in Japanese gardens, and you may also find it at a gardening supply store or nurseries.

A bamboo structured lantern was introduced to Japan from China in the early 14th Century. It was used amongst nobles and warriors for daily use, and Buddhist priests for ornaments. In fact, a drawn picture in the 15th Century shows that people were hanging bamboo lanterns to lead a funeral procession to the gravesite. By the 15th Century, the Japanese invented a foldable lantern for portability and storability. It is now what we use for Obon.

The bamboo lantern was inexpensive to make but the candle itself was very expensive for people, in general. The lantern became popular amongst people in the beginning of the Edo period (1603-1868), when the mass-production of the candle began. One of the prototypes of the Bon odori dances is recorded in *Ippen Hijiri-e* which was written in the 14th Century. Ippen was one of the well-known Nenbutsu teachers. Shinran Shonin lived in the 14th Century too. They might have danced together...

In our Jodo Shinshu tradition, the usage of the lantern at Obon has no official starting date. Instead, there are stories of how local Jodo Shinshu Sangha started to use the lantern at Obon. One of the biggest Sangha groups in Japan was a group in the Hiroshima region. They were called “Aki-monto.”

In the middle of the Edo period, there was a couple who owned a wholesale paper store in the territory of the Hiroshima Castle town. Unfortunately, they lost their young daughter. They lamented the death of their beloved child, and wished to build a stone structured lantern, like the one which is situated in a temple. However, they were not able to afford the cost of the construction. They hand-crafted a lantern with bamboo and wrapped it with paper. Later, they placed the lantern in front of their daughter’s grave. This is the origin of a lantern at Obon. In Hiroshima, these lanterns are known as “Bon Toro” or “Bon Doro.” I have included a Bon Toro picture from the Mainichi Newspaper, so you can imagine how people place the lantern in front and around gravesites. Hatsubon families place a white lantern, while other families place a colorful lantern. This way, people will recognize which families have recently lost an immediate family member.

Rev. Kaz, continued



Do you remember when you were child, how your grandparents were enjoying Obon under the hanging lanterns? I remember that my grandfather took me to the Obon dance. He bought me snacks such as shaved ice and cotton candy and gave me money for the game booths. He passed away 11 years ago at the age of 94. He left me a lot of fun memories of Obon, which I still remember. The Obon lanterns brings back memories of my loved ones, grandfather, grandmother, and cousin. When you see the Obon lanterns, who do you recall? I am sure that they bring back many sweet memories for you.

Again, under the current situation, we can only have a virtual Obon dance and Hatsubon Service on July 11. I will try my best to maintain our annual events as much as possible, so please watch the Service through your monitor or screen. If you do not have access to the internet, please let me know. I will record the Obon event on DVD and am happy to give you one.

In Gassho.