

The Higan-e Ceremony

The Higan-e Ceremony is widely practiced in all forms of Buddhism in Japan and is usually conducted on March 21 and September 22, the days of the vernal and autumnal equinoxes. On these two days, the length of daylight and darkness in a day is exactly the same, and the sun rises due east and sets directly in the west. 。

The memorial service conducted on these days for our departed ancestors is called the Higan-e Ceremony. The word "higan" is a translation of the Sanskrit word "paramita" (Japanese: haramitsu), and it means "arriving on the other shore," or "to extend." In other words, it signifies "getting across." Buddhism teaches that the world in which we live, called the impure world or saha realm (literally "realm of endurance"), is a place of suffering and troubles. In this schema, the saha world is located on this side of the shore.

The source of all suffering - the three paths of earthly desires, karma and suffering - is likened to a great river. And the life condition of enlightenment is likened to the other shore. In order to cross from this impure world, over the life and death sufferings of the great river, and reach the pure land on the other shore, people must embark upon the boat of the Buddha's teachings. In his writing, Yakuo-bon Tokuisho ("The Glory of the Yakuo Chapter"), Nichiren Daishonin states the following: In the great sea of sufferings of life and death, the pre-Lotus Sutra teachings are but a raft or, at best, a small boat. Even if the pre-Lotus Sutra teachings can transport us from this shore of life and death to another shore of life and death, it cannot take us across the great sea of life and death to the shore of great happiness. (Shinpen, p. 350) Thus, he teaches us that the only way to truly arrive at the other shore is by means of the "great ship," of the Daishonin's Buddhism - faith in the Dai-Gohonzon. Provisional Mahayana Buddhism, prescribed the practice of the six paramitas to arrive at the other shore.

These represent six methods of practice: almsgiving, keeping the precepts, forbearance, assiduousness, meditation and the obtaining of wisdom. The Daishonin, however, in his writing, "The True Object of Worship" quotes the following passage from the Muryogi Sutra: Even if we do not accomplish the practice of the six paramitas, they will naturally appear before us. (Kanjin no honzon sho), (Shinpen, p. 652; ref., M.W., Vol. 1, p. 64), Through this, he teaches us that we can naturally attain the benefit of the practice of the six paramitas, arrive at the "other shore" while living in this world and attain enlightenment in our present form.

Thus, the fundamental significance of arriving at the "other shore," or higan, is that it is extremely important for us, as living human beings, to attain enlightenment in our present form through the Daishonin's Buddhism. And in a spirit of appreciation, to present memorial offerings in behalf of our ancestors. In other words, the Buddhist practice of Nichiren Shoshu lies in the spirit of perpetual bon and higan memorials, accomplished through our daily practice for ourselves and others. Nichiren Shoshu performs the Higan-e Ceremony as a Buddhist practice for accumulating benefits and amassing virtue in the lives of the believer and the deceased.

The daylight and night time hours of the vernal and autumnal equinox are equal, signifying the inseparability of darkness (ying) and light (yang), as well as the oneness of good and evil. As the sutra expounds, "The Buddha desires

the Middle Way." For this reason the benefits of performing positive deeds on these days are superior to those practiced at other times. These days of the equinox present exceptional opportunities for us to arrive at "the other shore" (higan). Moreover, Buddhism expounds the four debts of gratitude one of which is to one's parents and ancestors.

Thus, during the Higan-e Ceremony, we make offerings to the Gohonzon, establish memorial tablets (tobas) for our ancestors and perform memorial services for them. This small good deed becomes a great positive act enabling us to reach "the other shore." This is the true significance of the Higan-e Ceremony.