

The Urabon Ceremony

Since the early days of Buddhism, the Urabon Ceremony is a time set aside for people to pray for the peace and happiness of the deceased. "Ura" (Sanskrit: ullam) of Urabon means "the agony of being hung upside down." It is a metaphor for the suffering of starvation and thirst one undergoes in the world of hunger. The misery of the life-condition of hunger is likened to being hung upside down. When one is hung upside down, it is impossible to help oneself. One's thirst cannot be quenched and one's horrible frustration is never completely satisfied in this position. "Bon" (Sanskrit: bana) means a tray or vessel of food to ease the pain of suffering. In other words, Urabon is the ceremony for those who can no longer help themselves. Its purpose is with the assistance of the priest to relieve their suffering by making an offering to the Buddha on their behalf.

The traditional dates for observing the Urabon Ceremony are July 15 and August 15. In Nichiren Shoshu, we offer daily prayers for the deceased during the fifth prayer of Gongyo. Thus in a sense, we are performing a daily memorial service for those who have passed on. It is very significant, however, that we also observe the Urabon Ceremony.

The origin of this ceremony is found in the Bussetsu Urabon Sutra (Sutra of the Festival of the Dead). This sutra tells about the experience of Maudgalyayana (Japanese: Mokuren), one of Shakyamuni's major disciples. Among Shakyamuni's ten major disciples, he was known as the one foremost in occult power. According to this story, Maudgalyayana's mother died when he was very young, and he regretted that he had not shown great devotion to her while she was alive.

Maudgalyayana wondered about his deceased mother's state. Using the occult power he had gained from his austere Buddhist practice, he searched the entire universe for her. To his astonishment, she had fallen into the world of hunger. This was the effect of having begrudgingly given the Buddha an offering while she was alive. Therefore, she was in total agony. Maudgalyayana immediately tried to use his occult power to send her food. Each time he did, the food changed into flames as soon as she put it in her mouth. Even more concerned, he sent her water to put out the flames. But the water immediately turned to oil so that the flames only blazed more furiously. As a result, his mother now totally on fire, suffered even more than before. She could only cry for help.

Maudgalyayana then realized that, even with occult powers, he could do nothing to help her. He went to see Shakyamuni Buddha for guidance. Shakyamuni gently said:

Maudgalyayana, if you always do good, you will be able to receive benefits from your deeds. But if you sow the seed of evil, you will harvest evil grain. Your mother was blinded by her selfish interest in the past. She was not aware of how great it is to benefit others.

Unfortunately, she is still dominated by her selfish interest and will have to continue to suffer. This is the concept of the law of causality, of karmic retribution. The most important thing for your mother is that first you attain enlightenment in accordance with the correct teaching of the Buddha. If you do so, your mother's greedy nature will

also be transformed. In any case, however, on July 15 of this year, invite priests from the ten directions and sincerely offer abundant food and drink to them. By doing so, you will save your mother from the incessant hell of hunger.

Maudgalyayana faithfully followed Shakyamuni's guidance. Through his offerings to the priests on July 15, Maudgalyayana relieved the sufferings of his mother for one kalpa, an immeasurably long, yet limited period of time. He was delighted with this accomplishment and asked Shakyamuni how he could help others benefit not only their deceased parents but seven generations into the past. Shakyamuni replied that they should carry out this Buddhist ceremony for the deceased each year. This is the origin of the Urabon Ceremony.

When we participate in this, there are some important points to remember. Maudgalyayana could not save his mother through his occult powers because they were based upon Hinayana Buddhism (literally, the "lesser vehicle"). He could only help her by following the Buddha's guidance to make sincere offerings to the priests whose prayers were based upon the Lotus Sutra. Even so, Maudgalyayana succeeded in relieving her sufferings for only one kalpa, not for eternity. Further, Shakyamuni told Maudgalyayana that he must first attain enlightenment through the correct teachings, and then his mother's enlightenment would be guaranteed. In the Urabon Gosho, Nichiren Daishonin writes:

Maudgalyayana's deceased parents live on in him. When Maudgalyayana's life attains Buddhahood, so will the lives of his parents. (Shinpen, p. 1376)

Eventually, Maudgalyayana did practice the supreme teaching of the Lotus Sutra and, as the Buddha Tamalapattra or "Sandalwood Fragrance" (Japanese: Tamaraba Sendanko), his supreme enlightenment enabled both his parents to attain enlightenment.

Now, however, in the Latter Day of the Law, the Lotus Sutra that Maudgalyayana practiced to help his mother is of no use. He practiced the teachings of Shakyamuni's "Buddhism of the Harvest" a transient teaching that benefits only those who enjoyed a past bond with Shakyamuni Buddha. If we practice these transient teachings, we cannot help ourselves or our deceased relatives. It might even harm the deceased in the same way Maudgalyayana's well-meaning occult practice further tortured his mother.

By contrast, the Lotus Sutra of the Latter Day of the Law is the Gohonzon, inscribed by Nichiren Daishonin, the True Buddha. Only the Gohonzon of Nam-Myoho-Renge-Kyo enables all human beings in the Latter Day of the Law to attain enlightenment. Anyone who chants Nam-Myoho-Renge-Kyo to the Gohonzon and fuses his life to it through correct practice can attain Buddhahood. The benefits of enlightenment are such that they are perfectly shared with others, including our deceased relatives, with whom we share a karmic bond.

Buddhism teaches that there are five guidelines for the propagation of the religion. These guidelines are a correct understanding of the teaching to be propagated, the receptivity of the people, the proper time to propagate, the laws and customs of the nation, and the sequence of propagation.

Nichiren Shoshu affirms that Nam-Myoho-Renge-Kyo is the true teaching to be propagated. As the number of people

who turn to True Buddhism as a way to increase happiness grows, it is clear that there is great receptivity among the people here and abroad. From our studies of the Lotus Sutra and the writings of the True Buddha, Nichiren Daishonin, it is also clear that this is the Latter Day of the Law and the proper time to spread his teachings. Consequently, the efforts of both lay believers and priests have been directed to fulfilling the Buddha's will, which is to "accomplish worldwide Kosen-rufu and never allow its flow to cease."

We must understand that the spirit and purpose of this ceremony go beyond simple remembrance of the deceased. It recognizes the eternally profound meaning of life and death in the light of Nam-Myoho-Renge-Kyo. If we understand this, we can honor the traditions of the nation in which we live, and maintain our determination to live wisely. This we do not only for ourselves and others, who remain among the living, but also for the sake of those who have passed on and those who are yet to come. We can then validate the truth and relevance of Nichiren Daishonin's teachings and, through propagation, begin to relieve the suffering of those who needlessly grieve because they do not understand that, even in the face of apparent death, life is eternal.

Since no single part of the universe is separate from all of the rest, Buddhism teaches that we must help the insentient world achieve enlightenment, too. Most important, however, we ourselves must first attain enlightenment through our practice to the Gohonzon, so as to remove the delusions afflicting us in the Latter Day of the Law. We send the benefits of enlightenment to the deceased to ease their present suffering and ensure that they may be reborn in a high life condition. This is the significance of the Urabon Ceremony.