

Sermons

March - *Higan* (The Other Shore) by Issho Fujita

Higan, "the other shore" or "the farther shore," is a sister word with *shigan*, "this shore." Our use of *higan* here derives from a metaphor. Buddhists say that the goal of practice is to cross the river from this shore of ignorance (the world of birth and death) to the other shore of awakening (the world of nirvana). This river is said to consist of four rushing streams: the stream of craving, the stream of clinging to being, the stream of wrong view, the stream of ignorance.



Reaching *higan* means going beyond all these streams. Mahayana Buddhism teaches that we can accomplish this crossing through our practice in this lifetime. But it is also traditionally taught that *higan* as a practice of crossing the river to the other shore of enlightenment is mainly for renounced monks and nuns. For lay people, practice to reach the other shore lies in visiting temples and graves to pay respects to the Buddha and ancestors. In this context, "the other shore" means temples and a gravesites. So there are two different versions of the other shore, one for monks and another for lay people. This is an illustration of the situation in Asia. There are "two versions of Buddhism", one for monks and one for lay followers.

In Japan the seasonal *higan-e* (The other Shore Assembly) until now has been focused on commemorating ancestors. In the Japanese Buddhist tradition, *higan-e* is held at temples twice a year for seven days (three days before and after vernal and autumnal equinoxes), priests and practitioners perform offering ceremonies for departed spirits of the founding abbot, successive generations of buddhas and ancestors, and lay followers. During this time people visit family temples and graves to comfort the spirits of ancestors, some of them travelling great distances. People usually call this period of the year as "*o-higan*," with the prefix "*o*" to make it more polite.

March and September are national holidays, making it possible for people to visit their family graves for *o-higan*. The living relatives prepare flowers and candles, incense and some favorite foods of the deceased. They sweep the area around the graves (most temples always have brooms available) and clean the gravestones. They put flowers in graveside vases and pour water into a special hole in the center of the grave. Incense is lit and water is poured over the headstones. Family members pay their respects by squatting and bowing their heads with hands pressed together. This is a time for people to punctuate the flow of everyday busyness and remind themselves to appreciate the life given to them by serenely putting hands together to the ancestors.

Higan comes from Sanskrit Buddhist word *paramita* which means "perfection." In Mahayana tradition we, as bodhisattavas who aspire to attain enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings, are walking from this shore toward the other shore by means of practicing the six *paramitas*: giving or generosity (*dana*), morality or keeping the precepts (*sila*), forbearance, tolerance or endurance (*kshanti*), effort (*virya*), meditation (*dhyana*), and wisdom (*prajna*).

According to Professor Kodo Matsunami, the six items that are indispensable when visiting the family temple and the family gravesite during *o-higan* correspond to the six *paramitas*. The items are water, powdered incense, flowers, stick incense, food and drink, and light. Therefore by offering these things to the Buddha and ancestors, one is actually practicing the six *paramitas*. Here is what he says about the six things. "Water is necessary for all life and so reminds us of the importance of giving. Powdered incense may be rubbed over the body to perfume it, getting rid of bad smell and refreshing both body and mind, just as keeping the precepts does. Flowers calm the mind, assuage anger and evoke forbearance. Stick incense, when lit, wafts a pleasant fragrance, recalling effort. Food and drink gives us a feeling of repleteness and reminds us of contemplation. Light refers to candles - as light illuminates the darkness, wisdom shows us in which direction we should move." Interesting, isn't it? It would be nice if we can keep these correspondences in mind when we perform rituals with these items.

Finally let us see what Dogen Zenji said about paramita. In his "*Shobogenzo Bukkyo* (The Buddha's Teaching)" he wrote; Paramita means "arriving at the other shore" [of enlightenment]. Although the other shore does not have the appearance or trace

from olden times, arriving is actualized. Arriving is the fundamental point. Do not think that practice leads to the other shore. Because there is practice on the other shore, when you practice, the other shore arrives. It is because this practice embodies the capacity to actualize all realms." (Treasury of the True Dharma Eye-Zen Master Dogen's Shobo Genzo vol.1 Edited by Kazuaki Tanahashi)

We should deeply investigate the meaning of "because there is practice on the other shore, when you practice, the other shore arrives". Here the duality of this shore and the other shore is beautifully transcended. The other shore has reached us when we practice *paramita* wholeheartedly. We, whether monk or lay, should remain mindful of the six *paramitas* in this sense at all times, not just at *higan*.

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