

Sermons

May - Ancestor Veneration (*Senzo Kuyo*) by Issho Fujita

Traditionally in Japan, a Buddhist altar (*butsudan*) is installed in the most solemn location in almost every household. Inside it are placed tablets with ancestors' names inscribed (*ihai*). Ancestors are remembered and venerated through various rituals and observances, such as offering incense and flowers, placing sweets and tea on the altar, chanting sutras, and performing annual ancestral ceremonies (*higan* and *bon*) as well as memorial services.



Recently it is said that Japanese people are slowly losing interest in the veneration of ancestral spirits. But showing appreciation of ancestors is still an important component in Japanese Buddhism, one through which the living feel that they are spiritually connected to deceased family members. By performing many forms of expressing their care of their ancestors, people can find and get in touch with their own roots more deeply through their ancestors. Therefore, they don't feel alone and alienated.

In the areas of Asia (China, Korea, Japan and Vietnam) whose cultures were strongly influenced by Confucian ideals of filial piety, respect for ancestors became very important and was incorporated in the teachings of the Buddha. But how about in areas outside of Asia, such as North America and Europe? To the people of those areas, is ancestor veneration just an "Asian" form of "primitive" or "pre-modern" religious belief? Does it have no spiritual significance or meaning to modern-day non-Asian people? Don't they need to practice, or at least understand the reason for the caring of ancestors?

Ancestor veneration is not a matter of belief, but a matter of practice—the "practice of looking deeply into ourselves in order to recognize the presence of our ancestors in us, in every cell of us" (Thich Nhat Hanh). When we understand it in this way, we can deepen and widen the concept of ancestor veneration. It becomes a practice for our ancestors AND us, both existing in the present moment, instead of merely doing something for deceased spirits only. We are the continuation of our ancestors, and those ancestors literally live in us. If we earnestly follow Buddha's teaching and live a happy and meaningful life together with other people, then that makes our ancestors within us happy as well. This way of living—ancestor veneration in the truest sense—can be universally recommended as a Buddhist practice.

Besides blood ancestors, we also have spiritual ancestors. When we start walking on the Buddha's Way, we are born anew into the world of Buddhas and Ancestral Teachers (*busso*). All those who have been walking on the Way before us become our spiritual ancestors. In Sotoshu, during morning service (*choka*), we have Ancestral Teachers Hall Sutra Chanting (*sodo fugin*). After chanting *Harmony of Difference and Equality (Sandokai)* and/or *Precious Mirror Samadhi (Hokyo zanmai)*, the chant leader (*ino*) recites the following *eko* (dedication of merit):

We humbly beg your true compassion and attentive concern. Having chanted the *Harmony of Difference and Equality* and the *Precious Mirror Samadhi*, we present the excellent merit just accumulated to the successive generations of buddhas and ancestors who transmitted the flame....

(STANDARD OBSERVANCES OF THE SŌTŌ SCHOOL)

And then the great assembly together recites the names in the lineage, beginning with Great Teacher Vipashyin Buddha and ending with the teacher immediately preceding the founding abbot of the particular monastery. This is a wonderful way for us to remember and repay their compassionate blessings.

We also have animal ancestors, plant ancestors, mineral ancestors, and so forth. Our existence is only possible with the support of these infinite ancestors; we live and practice together with them. Dogen Zenji refers to this togetherness of all as "Buddhas and Ancestors" (*busso*): "...[B]y the continuous practice of all buddhas and ancestors, your practice is actualized and your great road opens up. By your continuous practice, the continuous practice of all buddhas is actualized and the great road of all buddhas opens up. Your continuous practice creates the circle of the way."(*Shobogenzo Gyoji*)

We should take a fresh look at our care of ancestors in the light of this profound understanding. Then we can recreate and revitalize the way of ancestor veneration for the future.

No reproduction or republication without written permission. Copyright © SOTOZEN.COM All rights reserved.