

# Sermons

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## November - *Hoji* (memorial services) by Issho Fujita

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*Hoji*, literally translated as "dharma event", is an important Buddhist practice to commemorate a deceased person and to pray sincerely for the repose of his or her soul. It also provides a wonderful opportunity for surviving family and friends to reconfirm human ties which the departed brought about, to realize that they owe much to the deceased, to renew their gratitude to him or her and to deeply reflect upon themselves in connection with him or her.



It is believed that these *hoji* services will increase the merit of the deceased person so that he/she will be reborn in the pure land. Therefore these *hoji* are sometimes called *tsuizen-kuyo* (later-practice of offering goodness). In *Jucchikyo* (Daśabhūmika-sūtra, "The Sutra of Ten Grounds") three kinds of offering are taught: (a) offerings of incense, flowers, food, candlelight, etc.; (b) offerings of praise and reverence (by chanting sutras and worshipping the Buddha and his teaching); (c) offerings of right conduct (by practicing the Buddha's way and living a wholesome life).

After the Buddha entered into the nirvana, Buddhist monks did a ceremony of doing *gassho* and making prostrations in front of the stupa where his relics were placed. This commemorative ritual of reverence is the origin of *hoji*.

Nowadays in Japan after a funeral is held, *hoji* is performed every seven days after the day of death, seven times altogether. These memorial services are called *kinichihoyo*. This is based on the ancient Indian idea that the soul of the deceased would stay in an intermediary realm (*chūin*, or *chū* in Japanese) for 49 days after death, wandering between this world and the next. Each period of seven days marks a gradual loosening of the connection with this world and on the 49th day the deceased is reborn according to his/her karmic retribution.

Dogen Zenji wrote in *Shobogenzo Doshin* (Heart of the Way),

"...When you leave this life, and before you enter the next life, there is a place called an intermediary realm. You stay there for seven days. You should resolve to keep chanting the names of the three treasures without ceasing while you are there. After seven days, you die into another intermediary realm and remain there for no more than seven by seven days (49 days)...."

Through a funeral ceremony, a deceased person is made to take refuge in the Buddha, Dharma and the Sangha and to become an ordained Buddhist. And then while being in an intermediary realm, the deceased one devotes oneself to Buddhist practices under the protection of many buddhas. Family members and friends also support and encourage the deceased to diligently practice the Dharma by observing *hoji* every seven days. This is also a period of time for the bereaved family to mourn the loss, gradually coming to terms with it, and to regain a sense of peace.

There are also further memorial services after the 49th day, such as the service on the 100th day, the 1st year, 3rd year, 7th, 13th, 17th, 23rd, 27th, and 33rd year. These anniversary memorial services are called *nenkihoyo*. They are performed in order to support the deceased who have already gone to the pure land to continue walking on the path of the Buddha. Normally the 33rd year (sometimes 37th, or 50th year) is the last (*tomuraiage*, "end of mourning"), marking the time when the individual deceased is thought to have become absorbed into the general ancestral spirit. It means that the spirit is gradually purified by the power of *tsuizen-kuyo*, eventually loses its individuality and becomes a full blown bodhisattava (in Buddhism) or a guardian god (in Shinto).

When we pray for the happiness of a deceased person even after the death and accumulate the goodness by performing *hoji* (*tsuizen-kuyo*), it will eventually bring happiness to ourselves and our family members who are still alive in this world. Thus through observing *hoji*, the living and the dead can influence and help each other. Of course it is possible only when we do it for real. We must not make light of the power of these rituals.

