

Dharma Message for 7/12/26
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The Mirror of Obon

Seeing Ourselves in the Light of Unbounded Compassion

Aspiration:

"But when I reflect on this more deeply, I realize that our rebirth in the Pure Land is all the more assured because we cannot feel like dancing for joy as we would wish. It is defilement by evil passions that oppresses our hearts and prevents us from rejoicing. But since Amida Buddha, knowing this already, has called us 'common beings defiled by ignorance,' the Primal Vow is all the more our true reliance." (Tannisho, Chapter 9)

Good morning, everyone, and welcome. It is wonderful to see so many familiar faces collected for today's service. On June 26th and June 27th, Honpa Hongwanji Betsuin celebrated our Bon Dance. Thank you to all who helped make it so successful.

Every year, Obon invites us to take a break from our busy lives. We gather with family and friends, offer incense, listen to the Dharma, dance at the Bon Odori, and remember those who have gone before us. Yet Obon is more than a memorial service or a traditional celebration.

For me, Obon is as if looking into a mirror. A mirror does not change what it reflects. It simply allows us to see more clearly. When I look into the Mirror of Obon, I do not just see people who have died; I see my own life. I see the people who have influenced me, the events that have formed me, the gladness that has lifted me, and even the sorrows that have deepened me. Obon reminds me that none of us has arrived here on our own. We are each the result of countless causes and conditions that have brought us to this very moment. And if I am honest, I do not always like looking in the mirror, because I see every wrinkle, every scar, all my imperfections.

This year, the mirror reflected something very personal. This is the Hatsubon, my first Obon since my beloved companion, Avia, crossed the Rainbow Bridge. Many of you knew Avia. She was not simply a pet. She was my faithful companion, always nearby, always ready for a walk, always reminding me to slow down and enjoy the present moment. She maintained a habit of greeting each day with eagerness and each person with a look.

Like many people who have loved an animal companion, I experienced peace in the familiar image of the Rainbow Bridge. Whether we picture such a place or not is not really the point. It is a beautiful image that expresses something our hearts understand: love does not simply disappear because someone we cherish is no longer physically present.

When Avia passed away, I discovered something I had not expected. I did not miss the extraordinary moments. I missed the ordinary ones. The sound of her footsteps following me through the house. The light nudge reminding me it was time for a walk. The soft paw on my lap, tapping me as if to say, “come on.” The calm companionship of simply sitting together without saying a word. It is often the ordinary moments that become the most precious after someone is gone. You have experienced that, too. When we lose someone, we love, whether a parent, a spouse, a friend, or even a precious companion animal, we discover that it is the tiny things we miss the most. A familiar voice. A smile. A shared cup of tea. A simple routine that was so ordinary suddenly becomes something we would give anything to experience one more time.

That is why Obon has touched me so deeply this year. People sometimes ask what makes the Hatsubon, the first Obon after someone’s passing, different from every Obon that follows. For me, the answer begins with the way grief changes into gratitude.

From a Jōdo Shinshū perspective, I do not think Hatsubon is about whether our loved one somehow needs us. Hatsubon is for us. It is the first Obon in which grief begins to mature into gratitude. It is the first time we gather as a Sangha after the death of someone dear to us and begin to recognize just how much that person has given us. Their physical presence may no longer be here, but the love they shared, the lessons they taught us, the happiness, the kindness, even the challenges—they continue to live within us.

Looking into the Mirror of Obon this year, I also discovered something about myself. I wanted just one more walk with Avia. One more swish of her tail. One more quiet evening together. One more chance to say goodbye. That longing reminded me of another story we often hear during Obon: the story of Mokuren and his mother. Many of us know it well.

Mokuren was one of the Shakyamuni Buddha's great disciples. Through years of diligent practice, he reached extraordinary spiritual powers. Wanting to repay the kindness of his deceased mother, he searched for her and discovered that she had

been reborn in the domain of the hungry ghosts, suffering from unfillable hunger and thirst.

Filled with compassion, he tried to feed her himself. But every bowl of food he offered burst into flames before it reached her. Unable to help her through his own efforts, Mokuren sought the Buddha's guidance.

The Buddha instructed him to make offerings to the Sangha at the conclusion of the summer retreat. Through those causes and conditions, she was liberated from her suffering, and Mokuren, full of joy and gratitude, danced. Tradition tells us that this joyful dance gave rise to Bon Odori.

It is a beautiful story, but if we are honest, it raises a question many people quietly ask. Why? Why did Mokuren's mother become a hungry ghost? When we think of the hungry ghost realm, we often imagine people who committed terrible acts—murderers, tyrants, or those who intentionally caused great harm. Mokuren's mother does not seem to fit into that category. In Japanese, she seems to be suffering instead from *kokoro no yami* (the darkness of the heart). In today's language, we might even smile and say she was something of a helicopter mom. Now before anyone gets upset about parenting styles, allow me to explain what I mean.

I am not criticizing devoted parents. Most parents worry about their children. Most parents want to protect them. Most parents would do anything for them. That is perfectly natural. But Buddhism invites us to look below the surface. The problem was not that Mokuren's mother loved her son. The problem was that her love became attachment. Her care became possessiveness. Her concern became grasping. She could not let go. She wanted everything for her son, and in doing so, she lost sight of the larger world around her.

That is why the hungry ghost realm is such a powerful image. Rather than seeing it simply as a place of punishment, we can understand it as a lens that shows a state of mind. Hungry ghosts are always craving. No matter how much they receive, they always want more. Their hunger can never be satisfied because it stems from attachment. Isn't this true for us as well?

Our hunger is not for food. It is for certainty. For control. For things to stay the way they are. For the people we love never to leave us. For life to unfold according to our own plans.

When I found myself wishing for one more walk with Avia, I began to recognize something of that hungry ghost craving within myself. You have experienced it, too. That is why this ancient story still manages to speak to us after more than two thousand years.

The story is not asking us to judge Mokuren's mother. It is inviting us to recognize ourselves. Looking into the Mirror of Obon, we begin to see not only our loved ones. We begin to see our own attachments. Our own fears. Our own longing to hold on to what cannot be held. That can be an uncomfortable realization.

The Dharma never leaves us standing alone in front of the mirror. It gently invites us to look a little deeper. For many years, I thought the story of Mokuren was simply about filial piety—a son rescuing his mother through his own efforts (Jiriki). But as I have continued studying the Dharma through Shinran Shōnin's teachings, I have come to appreciate that something much deeper is taking place.

The story is not really about Mokuren's success. It is about the limits of self-power and the awakening to a compassion far greater than our own effort. It is inviting us to recognize our own limitations.

Mokuren wanted to save his mother because he loved her. Isn't that what any of us would want? If someone we loved were suffering, wouldn't we do everything within our power to help them?

Yet despite all his outstanding abilities, Mokuren discovered that there were limits to what he could do by himself. That realization speaks to me. When Avia died, there was nothing I could do to change what had happened. Like many of us who have experienced loss, I wanted to fix it. I wanted one more day, one more walk, one more opportunity to express my love. But life does not work that way. That is one of the greatest lessons Obon teaches us: there are some things we simply cannot control.

As ordinary human beings, we do our best. We care for one another. We comfort one another. We try to make wise decisions. We hope for good outcomes. Sometimes things go as we planned. Sometimes they do not. That does not mean we have failed. It simply means we are human.

Shinran Shōnin often described himself as a **bonbu**—an ordinary, foolish being filled with blind passions. I have always found comfort in that description because it reminds me that Shinran was not placing himself above anyone else. He was not

speaking as someone who had mastered life. He was speaking as someone who understood the human condition.

I suspect that most of us do not think of ourselves as foolish beings. We think of ourselves as reasonably intelligent people trying to make good choices. Yet if we are honest, haven't we all discovered times when our emotions blur our judgment? When fear gets the better of us? When attachment makes it difficult to let go? When we insist that things should go our way?

That is what Shinran meant. Being **bonbu** does not mean we are bad people. It means we are wonderfully, imperfectly human. That is why the Dharma is such good news. If enlightenment depended upon our own perfection, our own wisdom, or our own spiritual accomplishments, I do not think many of us would have much hope.

Instead, Shinran points us toward the immeasurable compassion of Amida Buddha, a compassion that embraces us exactly as we are. That understanding gets even clearer when Shinran comments on the writings of the great Indian teacher Vasubandhu. He poses a question that sounds philosophical at first:

"In the Mahayana sutras and treatises, it is frequently taught that sentient beings are in the final analysis unborn, like empty space. Why does Bodhisattva Vasubandhu express aspiration for 'birth'?" It is a fascinating question. If everything is ultimately empty of a fixed, independent existence, why speak of birth at all? Shinran answers by telling us that our lives arise through causes and conditions.

The "birth" of which Vasubandhu speaks is not the birth of an isolated, independent self. It is the provisional language we use to describe lives that come into being through an immeasurable network of relationships.

When I first came across that passage, I thought it was simply a piece of difficult Buddhist philosophy. Now I hear something much simpler. Our lives are gifts. None of us created ourselves. We are born because of our parents. We are formed by our families and our experiences. Teachers, friends, neighbors, and communities influence us.

We are sustained by farmers who grow our food, health care workers who care for us when we are ill, scientists whose discoveries improve our lives, artists and

musicians who nourish our spirits, and countless people whose names we will never know.

Every day we are supported by causes and conditions far beyond our ability to count. Obon reminds us to stop long enough to notice. That is why we express gratitude to our parents and ancestors. Not because they were perfect. Not because every family story is easy. But because without them, we would not be here. Our lives are woven into theirs, just as future generations will one day be woven into ours.

When we begin to see life this way, gratitude naturally arises. It is no longer gratitude for only the extraordinary moments. It becomes recognition of the ordinary moments as well. The morning cup of coffee. A joint meal with family. A phone call from a friend. A walk with a dear companion. The children's laughter. The beauty of music. The joy of Bon Odori. The advances in medicine that relieve suffering. The discoveries of science that improve our lives. The creativity of artists who help us see the world differently. These, too, are part of the countless causes and conditions that sustain us.

Living as **bonbu** does not mean withdrawing from the world. Quite the opposite. It means appreciating this precious human life just as it is. Shinran never asked us to become extraordinary people. He invited us to awaken within our ordinary lives. To laugh. To cry. To work. To love. To grieve. To make mistakes. To say the Nembutsu in gratitude, wherever we may be.

As Rennyo Shōnin would later encourage us, simply to "say the Nembutsu." No special place. No special time. Just gratitude arising directly from hearing the Dharma. While I prepared this Dharma message, I found myself returning once again to Avia.

When she crossed the Rainbow Bridge, I thought this first Obon would be mostly about sadness. Instead, it has become something else. I still miss her. Sometimes, I cry when I think of her, and I always will.

But when I look into the Mirror of Obon now, grief is slowly yielding to gratitude. I feel gratitude for every walk we shared. Gratefulness for the companionship she offered so freely. Recognition for the way she reminded me, every single day, to be present. And gratitude, because through her life and her passing, she helped me see the Dharma a little more clearly. A new face appears beside me in the mirror now. It is my new little girl, Tabi Kihara. Thank you, Tabi, for entering my life.

That is what Mokuren discovered as well. He wanted to save his mother. Instead, he awakened to a compassion far greater than his own efforts. That same compassion embraces each of us. Obon, therefore, is not simply about remembering the dead.

It is an opportunity to awaken to the numerous conditions that sustain our lives, to express gratitude to our parents and ancestors, and to recognize the unlimited compassion of Amida Buddha.

Looking into the Mirror of Obon, we discover that the reflection before us is not only of those who have gone before us. It is also our own. We see our joys and our sorrows. Our thankfulness and our attachments. Our strengths and our foolishness. And beyond our own reflection, we discover something that has been there all along—the immeasurable Wisdom and Compassion of Amida Buddha, embracing ordinary people exactly as we are.

That, I believe, is the true spirit of Obon.

Please put your palms together and let us recite:

Namo Amida Butsu, Namu Amida Butsu, Namu Amida Butsu.