

On Hungry Ghosts

In many cultures this time of year is connected with the dead. The natural world is either dying or going into deep sleep for the winter. These changes in our natural environment seem to trigger these same themes within us. For centuries, dating back to Druid, Celtic, and Roman times, English-speaking cultures have observed religious customs in late autumn that became incorporated into the Christian faith as All Hallows' Eve (Halloween) and All Saints' Day (Hallowmas).

This weekend the temple offers a transfer of merit ceremony called Feeding the Hungry Ghosts. The ceremony focuses on assisting "ghosts", both externally and internally. Ghosts are unresolved karmic energy. They are shadows, yet they seem real. They motivate us to act in accord with their perception of reality, if we believe them. They are longings and cravings which need not our fear and rejection, but our love and kindness, in order to convert into their True Form, that of the Unborn.

Food offerings go on a special altar, intended to attract and entice the ghosts. Ideally, the offerings are of a wide variety of tastes, colors, textures, sources (mountains, fields & ocean), and types (dry, wet, liquid) — though all vegetarian. The six tastes are: sweet, bitter,

sour, salty, hot, and earth (delicate/moist/bland). Small individual serving size dishes are best. Most importantly, prepare the offering with love, care, and respect. Pumpkins, winter squash, and fruit may be brought to place on or around the altar, too.

Segaki, a Japanese word meaning “feeding hungry ghosts,” is intended to assist recently deceased relatives and friends, as well as those who have died in disturbing, unsettled, or tragic circumstances. We can trace this ceremony directly to the historical Buddha Shakyamuni. He recommended such an offering of food and scripture recitation by the community as a way to help Moggallana, one of his chief disciples, offer merit to his mother. Moggallana had discovered that his deceased mother was suffering terribly, first in hell, and then in the realm of the hungry ghosts. The offering was successful, and she was born into a higher plane of rebirth.

The bonfire (“bone fire”) on Wednesday night (Ceremonial Burning of Karma – *Segaki Toro*) continues the theme of assisting the deceased. The paper tombstones (memorial tablets; *ihai* in Japanese) inscribed with relatives’ names are burned with the wish that through the merit of the *Segaki* offerings the “fire of immaculacy” will completely incinerate their karma – liberate them from the cycle of birth-and-death.

Let's remember that "hells" and "hungry ghosts" are not "places" in the way we usually think of such in our Western cultures. Such realms do not conform to our conventional notions of time and space. They are states of mind or energy. They are outside the usual geography of reality perceived by the mind and its five senses.

Do not spend time fretting or worrying about whether you can believe in such things. Rev. Master Jiyu was fond of quoting a line from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy." And then she celebrated these ceremonies with a confidence, sincerity, and compassion that left no doubt in one's mind that these other realms indeed exist.

The most helpful attitude to have toward these teachings is to keep an open mind, don't reject them outright, and get on with our practice doing something about the things we can — our own "ghosts" and "demons" of greed, hate, and delusion.

Rev. Oswin

October 28, 2009