

Remembering the Ancestors

Summary: In Olympia, Washington, the Vietnamese Buddhist community connects with ancestral dead through the celebration of the Ghost Festival. Similar remembrance traditions occur in many other Buddhist traditions, both in America and elsewhere.

A small Vietnamese temple in Olympia, Washington observes Vu-lan, sometimes called the Ghost Festival, a ceremony that marks the end of the traditional annual “rainy season retreat” for monks. Monks from the whole spectrum of Buddhist communities in the Pacific Northwest have come for this occasion. The Vietnamese congregation, along with families and guests from the surrounding neighborhood, is crowded into the Buddha Hall, which was formerly the sanctuary of a church. At the altar is a seated image of the Buddha, with the Hood Canal and the Olympic Mountains in the background.

On Vu-Lan, the monks dedicate the benefits and merit of their religious retreat to their parents, and especially to those who have died. The congregation also joins in praying for the dead and offering gifts to the monks. They remember the traditional story of the disciple of the Buddha who, through his extraordinary vision, saw his mother’s spirit, stranded as a “hungry ghost” in one of the realms of hell. He assembled a huge feast for the monks at the end of their season of retreat and he enlisted their prayers and merits to release his mother’s spirit from suffering. He danced for joy when his mother and seven generations of his ancestors were freed from suffering. The memorial altar here, as in all Vietnamese temples, is filled with the photographs of family members who have died.

In Olympia, those whose mothers have died are given a white rose as they enter the sanctuary, while those whose mothers are living wear a red rose. Because of its special focus on gratitude toward mothers, this day is sometimes called “Vietnamese Mothers’ Day.” The service includes the chanting of Buddhist scriptures, an explanation for the children of the special significance of this day, and several popular songs in Vietnamese. Huge parachutes are stretched over the yard and the women of the community have prepared a feast which is served after the ceremony.

This day is called Ullambana in South and Southeast Asia and is often observed by ceremonies of robe-offering to the monks. In China, the rainy season retreat comes earlier in the calendar year and ends on

the fifteenth day of the seventh lunar month, usually in late July. The Vietnamese Vu-lan festival is observed as Yulanpen in China and Obon in Japan. Because this day honors the memory of ancestors, especially parents, it is of great importance throughout the Buddhist world, where bowing before one's parents is second nature as a sign of respect.

In the Japanese Buddhist communities in the United States, the Obon festival brings colorful Japanese cultural and religious traditions together. People offer flowers and incense at the cemeteries or memorial altars of their ancestors. They clean their homes and temples and light lanterns to welcome back the spirits of the departed. The Japanese communities often gather at their temples for traditional feasting, church bazaars, and outdoor dancing, called Bon Odori. The Jodo Shinshu tradition does not see human offerings as able to give succor to the dead ancestors. It is only the grace and compassion of Amida Buddha that can save anyone. "It is rather a time to remember and honor all those who have passed on before us," writes one Jodo Shinshu minister. "It is to appreciate all that they have done for us and to recognize the continuation of their deeds upon our lives."