

Buddhist Festival Ceremonies **Celebrated in the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives** **(a Serene Reflection Meditation/Soto Zen tradition)**

Introduction. Buddhist ceremonial has developed over the centuries as a means of expressing gratitude for the Three Treasures of Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, of giving and receiving teaching regarding the meditative life, and of offering merit to others. Our Serene Reflection (Soto Zen) tradition also places particular emphasis on ceremonial as mindfulness training in its dynamic or active aspect. Through concentrating body, speech and mind in ceremonial form, we cleanse our karma, develop aspects of the enlightened mind, and learn to live and work in harmony with others.

Great Master Dogen wrote that in Soto Zen we have “just sitting” (pure meditation) and “wonderful practice.” Ceremonial is part of that wonderful practice and when properly done is rooted in and permeated with the stillness of pure meditation. The careful practice of ceremonial provides the opportunity to cultivate the heart-mind of gratitude that recognizes the Buddha Nature and flow of Immaculacy in and through all things. This recognition and gratitude is not limited to formal settings, but is extended to all the myriad activities of daily life. Thus the duality of sacred and secular is transcended and, as Dogen writes in *Bendowa*, “Nothing whatsoever in Buddhism can be set apart as a worldly task.”

Festival ceremonies are times in the Buddhist liturgical year when the laity is invited to join the monastic community in celebrating occasions of special religious significance. These holidays include key events in the life of the Buddha, memorials for prominent masters (Ancestors) of our lineage, seasonal transfers of merit for the deceased, national observances of remembrance, and ceremonies honoring various Buddhas and Bodhisattvas central to our tradition’s practice.

A festival ceremony is distinguished by a formal procession, called circumambulation, through the ceremony hall to the main altar, where incense is offered. This offering can signify an expression of reverence and gratitude, a transfer of merit, or the wish for the enlightenment of self and others. As part of the ceremony formal bows or prostrations are usually included, scriptures and invocations containing particular teaching for the day are chanted or recited, and a beautiful offertory is often sung by the precentor. The main altar usually focuses our attention on the subject of the festival by displaying an image (portrait, scroll, or statue) and/or a memorial tablet. During these ceremonies we generously offer merit to all and simultaneously look within, seeing how we might best express in our daily lives the teaching reflected in the ceremony.

January—Festival of Secular New Year. The New Year Ceremony provides an opportunity to reflect on the past year and to establish our direction for the year ahead. A meditation vigil or retreat often precedes the ceremony, which climaxes at midnight on New Year’s Eve. The celebrant “revolves” the *Scripture of Great Wisdom*, also known as the *Heart Sutra*, the central scripture in Zen Buddhism and the essence of the Prajnaparamita (Great Wisdom) Sutras. The revolving echoes the movement of the heart of training within ourselves as the Teaching is “turned” and “given” to beings in all directions. Celebratory juice is often drunk as part of the ceremony. Afterwards, the temple’s main bell may be rung 108 times by all present, signifying the myriad ways of breaking the Precepts and simultaneously the 108 ways of observing them—the means to enlightenment.

Festival of Maitreya Bodhisattva. Maitreya (Chinese, Mi-lo-fo; Japanese, Miroku) is the Buddha who will follow Shakyamuni Buddha in the future. Along with Gautama before His enlightenment, he is the only Bodhisattva revered universally by all Buddhist traditions. His name is derived from the Sanskrit *maitri* (Pali, *metta*), meaning “lovingkindness.” Thus he is called “the Loving One” or “the Friendly One.”

Maitreya is usually depicted seated on a throne or chair with his feet down, “western” style, and often holds a stupa (Buddhist reliquary). Or He may be portrayed as looking lovingly down from a heavenly realm upon the suffering world awaiting his birth, contemplating how to help sentient beings. In cultures influenced by China (Japan, Korea, Vietnam), he is depicted as Hotei (Chinese, Pu-tai), “the Laughing Buddha,” based on the figure of a tenth-century Chinese round-bellied monk carrying a bulging sack full of the Dharma. In the Zen traditions Maitreya represents the potential each of us can bring to fruition through training.

The Festival of Maitreya is traditionally celebrated on the first day of the year (in the west, January 1st). This date was also Rev. Master Jiyu-Kennett’s birthday, so the ceremony had a special significance for her and retains a certain poignancy for her descendants in the Dharma.

Festival of Great Master Seck Kim Seng. The Venerable Seck Kim Seng was the Chinese abbot in the Mahayana tradition who ordained Rev. Master Jiyu-Kennett as a monk in Malaysia on her way to study in Japan. Rev. Kim Seng trained at Ku Shan, a prominent monastery on the Chinese mainland before the Communist revolution. Like many other 20th century Chinese Masters, his background and training combined a Rinzai Zen lineage and Pure Land devotional meditation practice. In Malaysia he served as the Abbot of Cheng Hoon Teng Temple, the oldest Buddhist temple in Malacca, and as President of the Malaysian Buddhist Association. Rev. Kim Seng was much loved and respected by the Malaysian Chinese community and died in 1981. As in many of our festival memorials, a memorial tablet from the Founder’s Shrine, relics if available, and a portrait or photograph are placed on the altar. (January 6th)

February—Festival of the Buddha’s Renunciation. This ceremony honors one of the key events in the life of Shakyamuni Buddha—the leaving home of the young Prince Siddhartha in the 6th century BCE on his quest for the answer to suffering. Gautama, his family name by which he was known before His awakening, left his palace home and family in the city of Kapilavastu in northern India at age 29 to begin a six-year search that eventually led to his enlightenment beneath the Bodhi tree. The ceremony reminds us of the necessity in training to “let go” of the familiar and dare to launch into the unknown, not just once, but in each moment of meditation. A picture on the altar often shows Siddhartha on his horse Kanthaka leaping over the palace walls in the secrecy of night. (February 8th)

Festival of Buddha’s Parinirvana (Death). This most solemn ceremony of the Buddhist year celebrates the historical Buddha Shakyamuni’s entry into eternal meditation—Parinirvana. A picture or scroll on the altar usually depicts the Buddha lying on His right side beneath twin sala trees, surrounded by grieving disciples and a host of other beings. The ceremony dramatically illustrates the seeming darkness that engulfs us at the death of a great teacher (or our own death), the assurance of his or her “return” to the world, and the underlying certainty that the True Light, the Unborn Buddha Nature, can never die. During the ceremony the celebrant’s assistants move with incense through the congregation, collecting up wishes and hopes for the return of the Light of the Dharma, both externally in the world and internally in our own hearts. (Japanese, Nehan; February 15th)

Festival of Avalokiteshwara Bodhisattva. Avalokiteshwara, “Regarder of the Cries of the World,” is the Bodhisattva of Compassion and mercy dedicated to assuming whatever form is necessary to help living beings on their way to the Other Shore, Nirvana. Appearing sometimes male, sometimes female, in accordance with this vow, Great Compassion is ultimately beyond all

opposites. She often holds with one hand a lotus blossom, symbol of training and enlightenment, and pours out from a vase in the other hand the sweet water of Compassion upon a troubled sea of suffering existence. Avalokiteshvara represents our willingness to train ourselves for the benefit of others and to help beings however we can. Her festival is celebrated three times during the year. (Chinese, Kwan-shih-yin or Kwan Yin; Japanese, Kanzeon or Kannon—February 19th)

Festival of Samantabhadra Bodhisattva. Samantabhadra is the personification of Great Love, particularly as it is expressed through the activity of one who has taken the Bodhisattva vow. Her name means “Full of Virtue,” “Universal Love,” or “Universal Goodness.” In Japanese and Chinese Mahayana Buddhism, she is sometimes depicted as part of a triad, paired on the temple’s main altar with Manjusri, Bodhisattva of Wisdom, on either side of Vairochana, the Cosmic Buddha, or Shakyamuni, the historical Buddha. Samantabhadra rides a white elephant with six tusks: the white elephant is a symbol of purity in the East, and the six tusks represent the six paramitas or perfections which a Bodhisattva cultivates on her or his way to Buddhahood. (Chinese, P’u-hsien; Japanese, Fugen—February 21st)

March—Festival of the Spring Equinox. This ceremony is also known as Ohigan, “Crossing Over to the Other Shore.” The equinoxes are considered the times when things hold the most potential for change because all things are then equal—the best times for finding the Eternal. This ceremony is often illustrated by a scroll of an old man asking directions from a young child, pointing out the necessity of asking and accepting help from everyone and everything. The equinox ceremony is that of Feeding the Hungry Ghosts, Segaki (see October 31st).

April—Festival of Manjusri Bodhisattva. Manjusri is the Bodhisattva of Wisdom. His name translates as “Gentle Glory,” “the Wonderful, Fortunate One,” or “the One who is Noble and Gentle.” He is usually portrayed as a fair youth or maiden riding a fierce lion-like beast representing the self. In one hand he holds a sword with which to free oneself from attachments and delusion; in the other hand he holds a blue lotus upon which rests *The Scripture of Great Wisdom*. In monastic meditation halls of Soto Zen, Manjusri often appears as a monk whose body merges with the beast, that is, becomes one with the beast through the complete and loving conversion of the self. (Chinese Wen-shu; Japanese, Monju—April 4th)

Festival of Buddha’s Birth. This ceremony celebrates the Buddha Shakyamuni’s birth, traditionally observed in Mahayana (Northern) Buddhism on April 8th. His birthplace in Lumbini Park, a beautiful garden in what is now Nepal, is represented by a flower-adorned canopy, under which a statue of a small child Buddha stands upright pointing to heaven and earth proclaiming His appearance in the world. The white elephant, upon which the canopy rests, is a symbol of holiness in Asia and figured prominently in a dream of His mother, Queen Maya, at the time of His conception. In Japan this ceremony is known as the Festival of Flowers; our Order often includes it as part of Wesak (see below, May).

Festival of Great Master Seck Sian Toh. This festival memorial honors the Venerable Seck Sian Toh, from whom Rev. Master Jiyu-Kennett received the Bodhisattva Precepts as part of her monastic ordination in Malaysia. Rev. Seck Sian Toh was among other masters who were allowed out of China specifically for the ceremony. He was a Dharma brother of Rev. Seck Kim Seng, Rev. Master Jiyu’s ordination master. He died in 1990. (April 9th)

Festival of Great Master Keizan. Together with Great Master Dogen, Great Master Keizan Jokin is one of the co-founders of Soto Zen in Japan. His dedicated efforts in the 14th century caused the tradition to spread widely throughout the country, which together with his warm-hearted concern for the common people earned him the epithet of “mother of Soto Zen.” Keizan also wrote most, if not all, of our Soto Zen ceremonial, as well as founded Sojiji Temple, one of the two head monasteries in Japan where Rev. Master Jiyu-Kennett studied and trained in Japan. His *Denkoroku: The Record of the Transmission of the Light* is a key text studied in our tradition. (April 18th)

May—Festival of Wesak. This ceremony celebrates the Buddha’s birth, enlightenment, and Parinirvana—His life and Teaching. Observed by Buddhists throughout the world, it is the most joyous festival of the calendar and marks the beginning of the Buddhist New Year. The main altar is arranged as for the Buddha’s Birth (see April), but more elaborately. As in that ceremony, water or sweet tea is ladled over the Baby Buddha during the circumambulation, representing our sincere wish to experience the Water of the Spirit that flows in meditation. Sometimes specially dressed as the “royal sons and daughters of the Buddha,” the children of the temple lead the ceremony’s procession, offering lotus buds at the feet of the “King of the Dharma” standing under a fountain. After the ceremony the children usually receive small gifts of Dharma, and it is customary for the temple’s congregation to likewise present the monastic sangha with gifts of fruit, incense, fabric for robes, and other necessities. “Wesak” is the lunar month of spring in the calendar of southern Asia during which the people of that region hold Shakyamuni to have been born, enlightened, and entered parinirvana. (Alternately spelled Vaisakha, Vaisaka, or Vesakha—May 8th)

Festival of Remembrance on Memorial Day. This memorial offers merit to all those killed as a result of war, terror, and acts of violence. (Memorial Day is a USA holiday in late May.)

June—Festival of Avalokiteshwara Bodhisattva. This is the summer festival of the Bodhisattva of Great Compassion—see February 19th.

July—Festival of Achalanatha Bodhisattva. Achalanatha’s name means “the immovable one.” He personifies the bright willingness to train, even in the midst of great suffering, which the flames surrounding him symbolize. Achalanatha can also represent courage, steadfastness, vigilance, and determination. This Bodhisattva is a “king of light” and is usually enshrined to the left behind the main altar in Soto Zen/Serene Reflection ceremony halls. He usually carries a sword, used to cut ourselves free from the fetters that bind us to the wheel of karma and rebirth, and a rope or rosary that represents our commitment to train in the Precepts. (Japanese, Fudo—July 10th)

Festival of Nagyaarajyuna Bodhisattva. Great Master Nagyaarajyuna is the Fifteenth Ancestor in our lineage, having lived and trained in southern India in the 2nd/3rd century CE. He is especially revered for his teachings on *prajna* (wisdom) and *shunyata* (the immaculacy of emptiness), expressed succinctly in the *Scripture of Great Wisdom*. He is honored by all Mahayana traditions for being one of the, if not the, first great Mahayana master. (Japanese, Nagarjuna—July 24th)

Festival of Kshtigarbha Bodhisattva. The gentle Bodhisattva Kshtigarbha appears in the form of a kindly priest holding a monastic traveling staff and the wish-fulfilling gem or pearl. He is looked upon as helping all those in the six worlds who are in dire, disadvantaged, or vulnerable

circumstances, and as such has come to be regarded as the special protector of children, expectant mothers, animals, and travelers. Kshtigarbha has also taken an unending vow to stand at the gate to the hells, offering peace to all those who suffer because of the natural karmic consequence of evil acts. He, along with Avalokiteshvara, is one of the Bodhisattvas often portrayed as coming to greet the faithful trainee at the time of death. His name means “Earth Store,” “Earth Womb,” or “Earth Treasury.” In this festival the children of the temple often perform many of the ceremonial roles and assist the celebrant. (Chinese, Ti-tsang or Dizang; Japanese, Jizo—July 30th)

September—Festival of Great Master Dogen. This festival memorial honors Great Master Eihei Dogen, the Japanese monk who brought the Serene Reflection (Ts’ao-Tung or Caodong) teachings from China to Japan in the 13th century. He is considered the principal founder of Soto Zen in Japan and is highly respected by all Japanese Buddhist traditions. Dogen’s life was characterized by a great resolve to seek for the Truth and an uncompromising purity in his practice of the Buddhist Way. His 95-chapter *Shobogenzo: The Treasure House of the Eye of the True Teaching* is one of the key texts still studied by Soto Zen students today. In our Order’s liturgy, Dogen is sometimes referred to as Eihei Koso, a posthumous title. (September 9th)

Festival of Avalokiteshwara Bodhisattva. This is the autumn festival of the Bodhisattva of Great Compassion—see February 19th. (September 19th)

Festival of the Autumn Equinox. See Festival of the Spring Equinox above (March). The ceremony is that of Feeding the Hungry Ghosts (see October 31st).

Festival of Bhaisajyaguru Tathagata. Bhaisajyaguru is the Buddha of Healing, who offers compassionate teaching and blessing to all. His Medicine of the Dharma, found through meditation and training, cures the three poisons of greed, hate and delusion. He is usually associated with the blue-hued gem lapis lazuli (vaidurya) shot through with flecks of gold, symbolizing the tiny points of Light within the darkness of illness and suffering. In some iconography His body is colored dark blue. (Chinese, Yao-shih-fo; Japanese, Yakushi Nyorai—September 30th)

October—Festival of Bodhidharma Bodhisattva. Great Master Bodhidharma is revered as the First Chinese Ancestor. In the 5th century CE he left his home in southern India and traveled to China to spread the Dharma. Although Buddhism had been established in China for several hundred years, Bodhidharma was the first master to place primary emphasis on meditation. All the Zen schools are descended from him, and he has a small altar dedicated to him to the left of the Founder’s Shrine in Soto Zen ceremony halls. (Chinese, P’u-t’i-ta-mo; Japanese, Bodaidaruma—October 5th)

Festival of Feeding the Hungry Ghosts (Segaki). This elaborate transfer of merit is intended for all those who have died, especially in tragic or disturbing circumstances, or who are in unfortunate states of existence. A special altar having been prepared with many varied types of food to represent the wealth and nourishment of the Dharma, the ceremony begins with drums, cymbals and gongs played to focus our attention upon the task at hand. Many scriptures and invocations of Avalokiteshwara are recited as an offering of compassion, and transliterated Sanskrit mantras are used to call upon the Buddhas and Ancestors to assist us in our efforts to

help all beings in need of merit. Vegetarian food offerings, particularly a deceased relative's favorite dish, are welcome for placing on the altar. In the evening a ceremonial burning of (paper) tombstones may be held outdoors in which memorial tablets with the names of the dead are burned in a pyre, signifying the purifying of their karma. In Japan this holiday is known as the Festival of Lanterns. (October 31st; this ceremony may also be held at the equinoxes.)

November—Festival of the Founder. This traditional memorial honors the Ancestor in the temple's lineage who founded it. For many OBC temples, that monk is Rev. Master Jiyu-Kennett. At some temples such as Shasta Abbey, the first monastery established by Rev. Master Jiyu, the founder is Great Master Keido Chisan (Koho Zenji), her Transmission master in Japan. It is customary to found a temple in the name of one's master. Koho Zenji died on November 1, the traditional date for Founder's Day in the East, in 1967. He was the Chief Abbot of Daihonzan Sojiji, one of the two head temples and training monasteries of the Soto Zen Church in Japan. Some Order temples honor both Koho Zenji and Rev. Master Jiyu on Founder's Day.

Festival of Great Master Houn Jiyu-Kennett. As the founder of the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives, Rev. Master Jiyu was responsible for the Transmission of our Serene Reflection Meditation lineage from Japan to the West and thus is the recipient of the merit offered in this festival memorial. It is because of her great efforts and boundless compassion that we are able to encounter the Dharma and practice the Buddhist Way today. This memorial is celebrated on or near the anniversary of Rev. Master Jiyu's passing into eternal meditation in 1996. (November 6th)

Festival of Remembrance. This festival is a special memorial honoring those killed in war. It is often scheduled to coincide with events marking the end of the first world war of the 20th century. (In USA, November 11th, Veterans Day)

Festival of Buddhist Martyrs. Rev. Master Jiyu inaugurated this memorial ceremony upon the discovery in the early 1990s of the mass graves of 40,000 Buddhist monastics in Mongolia who were executed during the Soviet Communist regime of that country. The ceremony offers merit to all those who have died as a result of their Buddhist faith. As with other memorials, a calligraphed or inscribed memorial tablet is placed on the altar in front of the Buddha to represent those to whom the merit of the ceremony is offered. (approximate date November 17th)

Festival of Thanksgiving. This festival is a ceremony of gratitude to the Buddhist Ancestors and in North America is often celebrated on the national holiday of Thanksgiving. The altar is decorated as for a harvest festival, and offerings of food to place on the main altar are welcome. (Date varies according to country.)

December—Festival of Buddha's Enlightenment. This important festival, sometimes called Bodhi Day) celebrates Shakyamuni Buddha's moment of spiritual awakening under the Bodhi tree (*ficus religiosa*, a type of fig) in ancient India as he gazed at the morning star rising in the eastern sky. In Zen monasteries Rohatsu, the winter weeklong monastic retreat, often leads up to this ceremony. The altar may display decorative trees representing the Bodhi tree or the "jewel trees" which are often described in Mahayana scriptures. In some Order temples this holiday is celebrated on or near December 25th. (December 8th)

Festival of the *Avatamsaka Scripture*. The focus of this festival is the *Avatamsaka (Flower Garland) Sutra*, regarded as the crowning work and expression of Mahayana Buddhism. This scripture describes in detail the site of the Buddha's enlightenment, especially the countless beings present. Pre-eminent is Vairochana Buddha, the Cosmic or Dharmakaya Buddha, through whom most of the teachings are voiced. Also prominent are Maitreya, Manjusri, Samantabhadra, and other Bodhisattvas who exemplify and embody the extent of the Bodhisattva vow of training. The *Avatamsaka Sutra* is also the scriptural source for our Order's use of Buddhist winter holiday decorations—jewel trees, nets of lights, garlands, etc. (December 29th)

See *The Liturgy of the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives* and back issues of *The Journal of the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives* and its predecessors for more information. In our Order, festival dates have been adapted to a western calendar. The calendar of an individual temple may vary from the one outlined here. For example, holidays may be moved to a different date at the discretion of the priest of a temple. Also, additional ceremonies may be observed as part of the monastic liturgy (see *The Monastic Office*). National observances of remembrance will vary from country to country.

Quotation by Great Master Dogen is from the introduction in *Zen is Eternal Life*, by Rev. Master Jiyu-Kennett, several editions, Mt. Shasta, CA: Shasta Abbey Press.

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May the merit of this work benefit all beings.