

Feeding the Hungry Ghosts Inside and Outside

By Kokyo Henkel, 2010

We perform a special ceremony each fall called *segaki* or *sejiki*. I would like to talk about that a little bit, especially in relation to the “Awareness of the Self Receiving its Function,” the *Jijuyu Zammai* of Dogen Zenji, that we have been studying. The meaning of *segaki* is “feeding the hungry ghosts” or “making offerings to hungry spirits.” These days we sometimes call it *sejiki*. *Sejiki* means “Offering of food” (*gaki* is a hungry ghost and *jiki* is food).

One way to talk about a hungry ghost is that which is left over anytime we don’t receive our function completely. There’s some resistance to fully receiving our experience, whether good or bad, and this resistance creates a ghost. And this ceremony is a way to actually nourish these ghosts created by the non-reception of our experience, because there’s some pain and suffering in our inability to receive or accept what is happening. Even if our experience is unpleasant, our life is diminished if we don’t fully receive it. As beings in the human realm, our life degenerates, just a little, toward the dissatisfied hungry ghost realm where something is missing or we feel lacking in some way.

In our Zen tradition, I think that maybe more than any other ceremony, *sejiki* is really based on pure compassion. Sometimes we say that this is a ceremony for nourishing and fulfilling the unfulfilled parts of ourselves. I think that’s a wonderful way to talk about it, an American way. I think they wouldn’t talk about it so much that way in Asian countries where there’s more belief in an external Hungry Ghost realm. I think it’s great that we speak of it that way to bring it home, but it’s important to remember not just our own unnourished aspects, but the “hungry ghosts” all over the world, any beings that are created from not fully receiving their experience.

In Buddhist cosmology the hungry ghost realm is one of the classes of beings created through resistance to complete reception, and whether we take this cosmology literally or metaphorically may not be that important in the end. I consider myself not so superstitious really; when I hear about these six realms I think about how we all go through these mind states as humans. However, the more that I practice, the more open I am to the possibility that there are realms other than human that share this universe with us. In this country we connect *sejiki* ceremony with Halloween, particularly the practice of trick-or-treating. I don’t know the origin of this Halloween practice, but it’s a similar thing when “ghosts” come to the door and ask to be satisfied with food and candy, and we practice making offerings to them. The inner meaning of this ritual is not unlike *sejiki*.

Regarding the origin of this ceremony, it comes from a Mahayana sutra called the *Ullambana Sutra*. *Ullambana* means “hung upside-down” – the suffering of the hungry ghosts is like being hung upside-down, that kind of discombobulated discontent of being suspended in such a way. The story goes that Mahamaudgalyayana, Buddha’s disciple, one of the ten great disciples known especially for his spiritual powers, the kind of magical powers popular in India at that time, with his Divine Eye, his mystical vision, could see into these other realms. He perceived his own deceased mother in the hungry ghost realm. Because of rebirth, any humans could be born in the hungry ghost realm, as well as in the animal realm, or others. Due to Maudgalyayana’s mother’s non-reception of her experience during her lifetime she had ended up in this hungry ghost realm. When Maudgalyayana with his vision saw her there, he was greatly distressed and wanted to help her in some way.

The hungry ghosts are depicted as having giant bellies and very narrow necks; there’s this big space to fill but it’s hard to get food to it. That’s the symbolic image: big empty space and very

hard to satisfy it. So Maudgalyayana's mother was like that, and he watched as she would pick up food, and how just as she was about to put it in her mouth, it would turn into burning coals. She couldn't eat it. So he went to his teacher, the Buddha, and said, "Is there some way I can help her?" The next part of the story is really wonderful. Buddha said, "Not only can you not help her, but all these other spirit beings and human beings can't help her either. Only the awesome power of the assembled sangha can help her in the hungry ghost realm." This is one of the really key parts from this origin story that plays out now. We all have these realms in ourselves, and we see the suffering of the world and feel helpless on our own. But the "awesome power of the assembled sangha," when we come together in this ceremony, when we chant together and make these offerings together, creates a group intention that is very moving. When we come together in numbers, with unified, positive intention, amazing things can happen.

It's really about the intention behind such a ceremony that makes actions such as reciting mantras transformative. Even when doing them without any particular intention there may still be some effect, but if we put wholehearted intention into some particular mantra, an effect starts to happen, because actually intention creates the world. In the beginning of the Chinese version of this ceremony, the first lines include a quote from the *Avatamsaka Sutra*: "The three worlds are created by mind only." That kind of sets the stage for the ceremony. That's actually the spirit of this ritual of feeding the hungry ghosts, this strange, esoteric ceremony – it's mind, it's all mind, which is another word for intention; so if our intention is directed in a certain way, that actually does change the world. So the basic spirit or intention of this ceremony is: "May all beings be able to receive their experience completely so that they may function completely." And this is also the spirit of Dogen Zenji's zazen, or *Jijuyu Zammai*: just sitting in the awareness of the self receiving its function. And when the self receives its function, this is the self's fulfillment or enjoyment. Hungry ghosts are nourished and satisfied, no longer hungry, and they can then be more available to help others.