

## The Hoji Ritual in My Life

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“What are your plans for this weekend?” a friend of mine asked me, two years ago. “We are going to hold a Hoji-party (or service) on behalf of my mother. Since she knew my mother has been dead for many years, she asked more details about Hoji, and I explained that it is a Buddhists’ reunion among family members and relatives in commemoration of the deceased. When we talked more about the meaning of Hoji, I clarified that it is the traditional reunion carried out even several years after the death of one family member by the bereaved family and its relatives. The friend of mine happens to be Professor Eva Bueno, who now teaches at Mary’s University in San Antonio, Texas. The question that gave origin to my first attempt to explain Hoji – and maybe to understand it better for myself – was asked during a friendly visit to our house while she was in Japan. Now, two years later, I have a chance to write this short essay and participate in this discussion about how the different cultures see death, say farewell to their loved ones, and commemorate their memory.

Hoji starts at the time of funeral and the reunion is held once every week till 7 weeks, which completes 49 days of religious service. The 49 days have a meaning because this is the time during which the deceased would travel through the land of the newly dead until he or she meets Enma a kind of judge to decide whether the dead should go to Heaven or Hell.

Then comes around the 1st cycle reunion, 3rd cycle reunion (which actually comes around one year after the first cycle) followed by the 5th, the 7th, the 13th, the 25th and finally the 50th, by which time the most members who took part in this long process of reunion are gone and the role of the service are most likely to be carried over to the shoulder of the next generation.

Personally, I think this tradition of Hoji plays dual roles: one it provides the bereaved family members with the healing process from the broken heart (the “grief process,” according to Alfons Deeken, Professor of Philosophy at Jochi university, Tokyo) in the immediate phase of the loss of the deceased. The healing process may range from the day one to the first or third year.

Another role it plays is to provide each reunion members with the opportunity to come back from their own daily humdrums to the moment where they can reflect on their own lives from the view point of life and death of human beings, not in abstract thought but right through the life of the particular person, the deceased for whom the Hoji is held and to share the experience of the bereaved members in this context after the loss of their beloved member.

Let me dwell on its first role: the healing process. According to Professor Deeken, who initiated in Japan a unique encounter group of death education, called “The meeting to think about life and death,” there are 12 stages or reactions any bereaved family may go through.<sup>1</sup> The 12 reactions

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Deeken proposes will not necessarily occur one through twelve by turns or in step-wise transition, but some may be skipped, some may return and some may be inter-mingled, depending on the case and the bereaved person. They are: 1) the reaction of psychological trauma and paralysis; 2) of denial; 3) of panic; 4) of anger and indignation; 5) of resentment and hostility; 6) of self-recrimination (the death could have been prevented or delayed if I had done... something); 7) of forming imagination and fantasy (what if); 8) of solitude and depression; 9) of mental confusion and/or apathy; 10) of giving up or acceptance; 11) of finding new hope and possibly followed by recovering of the sense of humor and finally 12) of recovery or establishing a new self-identity.

Deeken proposed these features to help people understand the process of the psychological recovery of the bereaved family so that people can make as correct judgment as possible whether to leave them alone or its time to give support or active medical intervention. Of these features what I think relevant in view of healing role that Hoji re-union could play are, 1) the moment of encounter and sharing of grief and ideas with other person through the re-union, and 2) encouraging the bereaved to have a dialogue with the deceased; the dialogue held in a positive way can serve as a fountain from which the bereaved taps new hope to live.

The bereaved people needs at some point in their process of healing from the sorrow of the eternal parting with the deceased an opportunity to come out of their shell of despair. Hoji re-union can provide them

with such opportunity where they meet other people and hopefully can share the sorrow of similar unhappy experience to know that they are no alone going through the predicament and find themselves standing on the same footing with others. This kind of sharing experience needs a proper stage set for the purpose and cannot easily be obtained by the bereaved members just by going back to their daily lives in the office or in the community they belong. In Japan talks about death is still a taboo and even if the conversation took a turn toward the subject, people quickly put on a façade or state a cliché of condolences and would not dare wade into the depth of sorrow and share their inner experience.

The above mentioned second role of Hoji is also an officially recognized view about it by the Jodo-shinshu sect of Buddhism. In fact, the originality of the idea of Hoji in Jodo-shinshu was designed not for the memory or for the benefit of the deceased that the /she may rest in peace in Heaven, but rather to call on the members themselves who gather together to think seriously about their own lives. Buddhism, in contrast to general view in Japan, is always concerned with the living: it calls to the attention of the living the crucial question how to live our finite life, what this life is meant for us, rather than looking back the past or proceed with a funeral which is but a social ritual to tell to the society that certain person had left it. We don't have to get together again and again until several decades to tell the society that someone died. Obviously the main guest in Hoji is none other than the members who get together.

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<sup>1</sup> This can be likened to the 4 stages a dying patient may go through, described by Elizabeth Kubler Ross in her book . Living with Death and Dying. Also of interest are the following books: Healing Into Life And Death, by Stephen Levine, and Death, the Final

Stage of Growth, also by Elizabeth Kubler Ross. All these books try to bring to the discussion the aspect of consolation for the ones who remain and have to face life without a loved one.