

## *The Wheel of the Year*

- 1 SPRING ~ BUDDHA'S BIRTHDAY
- 2 SUMMER ~ FEEDING HUNGRY GHOSTS
- 3 AUTUMN ~ CEREMONY FOR THE BELOVED DEAD
- 4 WINTER SOLSTICE ~ LIGHT & DARK
- 5 NEW YEAR'S EVE ~ BEGINNING AGAIN



# Buddha's Birthday

SPRING

## PREPARATION

A flower-covered bower with a statue of the baby buddha standing in a bowl of (cooled) sweet tea is set up on or in front of the altar, with a ladle nearby

The sweet tea represents the sweet rain that was said to fall when Siddhartha was born, and / or the perfumed water in which arriving sages washed the baby



Participants have been invited to bring flowers, which are massed around the hall

This represents Lumbini ('the lovely') where Siddhartha was born, and the tree that supported his mother Mahamaya as she gave birth

## CEREMONY

Holder of the Ceremony gives a welcome & introduction

(Optional : Timekeeper leads one period of sitting and walking meditation — depending on the participants)

Honoring the children : Kids offer flowers at the altar

Cantor leads singing of "Row, Row, Row Your Boat" in a round, as people come to the altar to ladle tea on the baby buddha

Row, row, row your boat  
Gently down the stream  
Merrily merrily merrily merrily  
Life is but a dream

Once everyone has returned to their seats, a brief talk on the meaning of the day

Cantor leads singing of Ti Sirana

Refreshments are served

## KOANS FOR BUDDHA'S BIRTHDAY

In medieval Japan, the nuns of the great temple of Tokeiji would take up the poems composed by earlier nuns as koans. Here are some poems for Buddha's Birthday, written by Yodo, the fifth abbess of Tokeiji, and her attendants, along with the questions about them that were asked in later generations.

1 /

Decorate your own heart,  
for the buddha of the flower hall  
is nowhere else.

How do you recognize your own heart?  
How would you decorate the flower hall?  
If you revere a buddha who is in your own heart, what do you need with a flower hall?

2 /

Throw the past into the street.  
What is born in its place, on the flower altar,  
let it raise its newborn cry.

When the past has been thrown away, what is born in its place?  
Let's hear the newborn cry.  
Where is the flower altar?

3 /

Born, and forgetting the parents who bore you —  
the parents who are Guanyin and Shakyamuni.

Where is the birth?  
Where are Guanyin and Shakyamuni?

## THE STORY OF BUDDHA'S BIRTHDAY

Mahamaya's child was conceived in a dream. In her ninth month, she set out for her parents' home so that she could give birth there, as was the custom in those days. Along the way she stopped at Lumbini to rest in a grove of trees, where birds sang and peacocks strutted among the flowers. Suddenly unsteady, Mahamaya stood among the roots of a great tree. As she reached up for one of its branches, heavy with flowers, she gave birth to a son. As soon as Siddhartha was born he took a step and pointed with one hand to the sky and with the other to the earth. He said, "Above heaven and below earth, only I, alone and sacred."

Attendants wrapped the boy in silk and carried him back to the palace. Seven days later Mahamaya died of unknown causes and was taken into the heavenly realms. Siddhartha was raised by her sister, Mahaprajapati, the Lady Gautami, who later would become head of the order of bhikshunis (buddhist nuns).

### A DIZZYING NOTE ON CALCULATING BUDDHA'S BIRTHDAY

Buddha's Birthday is celebrated at different times by different schools of Buddhism in different countries, based on a variety of lunar / solar calculations — basically sometime between April 8 and the first full moon in May (or June in leap years).

In Japan Buddha's Birthday is celebrated on Hanamatsuri (Flower Festival) and is based on the solar Gregorian calendar, which makes it April 8 every year.

In the Chinese and Korean calendars Buddha's Birthday is on the 8<sup>th</sup> day of the 4<sup>th</sup> month after the lunar new year, which means the date changes every year.

The Tibetan calendar has Buddha's birthday as the 7<sup>th</sup> day of the 4<sup>th</sup> lunar month.

The Indian calendar uses the 15<sup>th</sup> day of the 2<sup>nd</sup> month after the new year.

In Southeast Asian countries, Vesak is celebrated on the first full moon in May, except in a leap year, when it is held in June. Vesak is a combined celebration of the birth, enlightenment, and death of the Buddha, which some Theravadins believe happened on the same day of the year (the 15<sup>th</sup> day of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Indian lunar month). But in Mahayana tradition the Buddha's birth (8<sup>th</sup> day of 4<sup>th</sup> month), enlightenment (8<sup>th</sup> day of 12<sup>th</sup> month), and death (15<sup>th</sup> day of 2<sup>nd</sup> month) are believed to have occurred on different days of the year.

# Feeding Hungry Ghosts

## SUMMER

**First**, we meet on the fifteenth day of the seventh lunar month to make an offering for the healing of hungry ghosts, in a ceremony based on traditional Ullambana and Obon commemorations. We discuss how we understand hungry ghosts in our own time, sing a beautiful chant of commitment to ending their / our suffering, and make a donation to the unattended among us. (See page 10 for more information)

**Second**, two weeks later we meet again to collect donations participants have brought for a food bank, in honor of the two-week duration of traditional Ullambana commemorations.

Timekeeper leads meditation : a 40-minute period followed by a 5-minute walk

This is in honor of the long communal retreat during the summer monsoon season in India, which is why we sit for 40 instead of 25 minutes; at the end of the retreat, on the 15<sup>th</sup> day of the 7<sup>th</sup> lunar month, the monastics assembled before returning to their itinerant lives, and this is when the Ullambana story took place

Holder of Ceremony gives talk on the origins and meaning of the ceremony  
(See page 10)

Holder leads discussion of how we see hungry ghosts in our time now

Cantor leads singing of “Gate of Sweet Nectar” (See page 9) nine times while everyone makes an offering of bird seed into a bowl at the altar (The bird seed can be passed out to participants or held in a second bowl on the altar)

Cantor makes a dedication to healing hungry ghosts

Holder or Cantor announces the conclusion of the ceremony in two weeks, when everyone will bring donations for the food bank; if available, hand out lists of what’s needed

Cantor leads The Four Vows

Participants scatter bird seed in the garden

In many parts of Asia people launch lanterns onto the waters at Ullambana. This is environmentally tricky, but it’s beautiful if you can find a non-harming way to do it.



## GATE OF SWEET NECTAR

Calling out to hungry hearts  
Everywhere through endless time  
You who wander, you who thirst  
I offer you this heart of mine

Calling out to hungry spirits  
Everywhere through endless time  
Calling out to hungry hearts  
All the lost and the left behind

Gather round and share this meal  
Your joy and your sorrow  
I make it mine

Bernie Glassman  
& Krishna Das

*This chant can be heard on Krishna Das' album Door of Faith  
and on YouTube ([youtube.com/watch?v=bLxoDtuxj-k](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bLxoDtuxj-k))*

## THE ULLAMBANA STORY & ITS MEANING

This Mahayana tradition began a few hundred years after the time of the Buddha, based on a story about Maudgalyayana, the most accomplished of the Buddha's disciples in the supernatural arts. He had all kinds of powers : he was clairvoyant, could read people's minds, and performed magic. Most important for the story, he could travel through the six realms of existence, which are inhabited by contented gods (devas), angry anti-gods (asuras), humans, animals, hell-dwellers, and hungry ghosts. Hungry ghosts represent insatiable craving : They have small mouths, thin necks, and large bellies; they're ravenous but either can't swallow food or the food turns to fire.

The South Asian monastics of that time gathered during the summer monsoons for intensive practice. On the 15<sup>th</sup> day of the 7<sup>th</sup> month of the lunar calendar, they prepared to return to their itinerant lives. Maudgalyayana spent some of his retreat looking for his dead parents in the six realms, discovering that his mother was in torment, having been reborn as a hungry ghost. In his meditation, he tried to use his metaphysical skills to save her. In one version of the story, he goes to the realm of the hungry ghosts, bringing her a bowl of magical food, but she can't eat it; he tries spells to release her but they don't work. He's distraught because everything he's good at can't save her, so he goes to the Buddha to ask for help.

The Buddha tells him that no one individual has the power to save a hungry ghost; it takes the entire community. Maudgalyayana holds a feast for the monastics and asks for their help, and his mother is saved. Maudgalyayana had been weeping, but when he understands that if we take care of those in need among the living we'll help save the hungry ghosts in that other realm, he begins to laugh and do a dance that is still done today. So this became known as the day of joy.

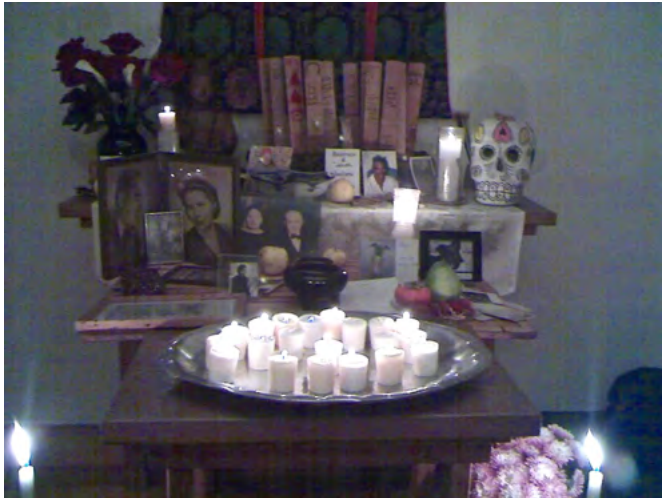
In East Asia, Ullambana blended with already-existing ancestor ceremonies. In China the hungry ghosts become the spirits of the dead that we're not taking proper care of, so they're roaming in a kind of half-life. In Japan families get together to clean graves and feast the ancestors in what has become a joyous holiday.

Here in the West things continue to evolve, as with this ceremony. We tend to see both the psychological and cultural implications of hungry ghosts, in personal and communal patterns of greed and insatiability. We're also moving from ideas of hungry ghosts as other beings punished for some transgression or as neglected ancestors who are haunting us, to something more internal : What are the hungry ghosts in us? How do we project that onto others, those in society whom we are not feeding or taking care of, who live, as the tradition says, in wild and ruined places? It's important to do something concrete about this as part of the ceremony, through donations to a food bank or something similar.



## *Ceremony for the Beloved Dead*

### **AUTUMN**



This is similar to a Dia de los Muertos or All Souls Day gathering, except that it includes elements of a Mahayana Forty-nine Day Ceremony (See page 33 for more information). Although we usually do the Forty-nine Day Ceremony soon after someone has died, most of us have loved ones for whom we didn't have the chance, and it can be very moving to do it in community like this.

### **PREPARATION**

- ❖ Participants are invited to bring pictures, ancestor tablets (see page 34) or other mementos of the dead for the altar
- ❖ The altar has a tray of votive candles on it

### **CEREMONY**

- ❖ Cantor leads Guanyin Sutra of Endless Life
- ❖ Timekeeper leads seated and walking meditation as a time to recollect the dead
- ❖ Participants light a candle on the altar for each person being remembered
- ❖ (Optional, depending on size of gathering : Participants speak about the dead person when lighting candle — memories, thanks, release)
- ❖ Cantor leads Celtic Blessing (“Deep Peace ...”)

# Dark & Light

## WINTER SOLSTICE

A ceremony that honors the embracing dark as well as the return of the light at the solstice ... We begin in the dark, taste its sweetness in the form of chocolate, chant the sun up, invite autumn spirits to return to their own lands, renew ourselves and our community with visualizations of the new light, and share a feast together

### PREPARATION

- ◆ We gather before dawn in a dark hall to sit the solstice sunrise
- ◆ The altar is done in black and gold, with snow in a silver bowl if possible, a small branch for water blessing, and pieces of dark chocolate in a dish
- ◆ Optional : Invite participants to bring objects that symbolize the dark and / or the light to put on the altar
- ◆ Have an unlit fire ready in the fireplace, and an unlit votive candle at everyone's place (a grouping of large candles can substitute for a fireplace)
- ◆ Have coffee, tea, and light refreshments available for before the ceremony

What is Zen?  
Snow in a silver bowl.

### CEREMONY

Holder of Ceremony speaks briefly about sinking into the dark and into the dreaming of all beings

Timekeeper leads seated and walking meditation for as many periods as it takes for the dawn to appear

While it's still dark, in the midst of meditation, eat the dark in the form of chocolate passed around from the altar by the Cantor

As the sun rises, Cantor leads chanting of *HO* ("Dharma" in Japanese) together in a sustained and deep way, going for as long as it wants to last



Cantor lights a fire in the fireplace and passes a flame from it around to light each person's votive candle

Timekeeper leads seated meditation

Towards the end of the meditation, Holder performs a water blessing with melted snow from the altar

“All you demons and hungry ghosts, we thank you for your autumn visits. It’s too cold for you here now! Please go home and be comfortable, and let us be comfortable here on our own.”

Cantor leads chanting of Ti Sarana

Holder leads body of light visualization

*This is a traditional Tibetan winter solstice ceremony done lying down with eyes closed*

- ◆ Imagine the wind blowing away first your clothes, then your skin, flesh, muscles, blood vessels, and organs, until there’s only a skeleton left
- ◆ The wind stops; lie for awhile as a skeleton
- ◆ Then imagine a glowing jewel inside your ribcage, where your heart would be
- ◆ Layer by layer reconstitute your body — organs, blood vessels, muscles, flesh, skin — except this time it’s all radiant
- ◆ Lie for awhile as a body of light

DARKNESS

SILENCE

MEDITATION

LIGHT

CEREMONY

FEASTING

Holder leads ancient Chinese meditation

*Everyone returns to a seated meditation position, aware of the radiance of themselves and everyone else*

- ◆ Let your radiance flow out to everyone else in the room so that everything disharmonious among us dissolves
- ◆ Call in the ancestors and invite them to sit with us
- ◆ The radiance circulates through the group, living and ancestors, and eventually flows out into the rest of world
- ◆ Let the light soften and mellow; imagine yourself as a mountain and everyone else, too; the light begins to flow back into the mountains, settling at everyone’s hara (the root of breath, three fingers below the navel)
- ◆ When you’re ready, return to your meditation and breathe normally

Holder closes the ceremony quietly, without many words, and then invites everyone for ...

Breakfast feast

## *Beginning Again*

### NEW YEAR'S EVE

We meet about 10:30 pm and finish the ceremony just after midnight, when we have refreshments. This is considered an auspicious time for taking up the Way, recommitting to practice, rededicating altars, and awakening intentions for the year.

The ceremony can be held on December 31 or at the lunar new year awhile later. (Many people appreciate having an event like this as an alternative to New Year's Eve partying.)

#### PREPARATION

- ◆ Tell participants ahead of time to bring statues or other practice objects to be blessed and rededicated
- ◆ On the altar in addition to the usual : a statue of Guanyin instead of a Buddha, a bowl of water and a branch for the water blessings, a lit blue candle in its holder and divination sticks if available, Guanyin oracle cards in a bowl (see below), and an extra cloth on the floor in front of the altar as a place to set practice objects being rededicated
- ◆ The large temple bell is just outside
- ◆ Warm apple cider and cookies are ready for after the ceremony



Hiroshige, New Year's Eve  
Foxfires at the Changing Tree

#### CEREMONY

Holder of Ceremony introduces themes, and starts introductions around the circle

Recommitment to the Way / Setting Intentions

- ◆ Timekeeper leads seated meditation
- ◆ Cantor leads Ti Sarana

Rededication of Practice Objects

- ◆ One at a time, people place their statues or practice objects on or in front of the altar, depending on space
- ◆ When all are in place, Holder of the Ceremony gives objects a water blessing

### Purification

- ◆ Timekeeper leads meditation while Holder offers prompts, on physically cleaning one's home and workplace ... clearing one's heart-mind ... and ceremonially regenerating spiritual ties
- ◆ Holder performs silent water blessing of participants during the meditation

Cantor leads Sho Sai Myo Kichijo Dharani 9 times for protection, peace, & happiness

- ◆ 3 for oneself
- ◆ 3 for loved ones & community
- ◆ 3 for the world

Timekeeper leads walking meditation or stretch

Holder introduces Guanyin oracles

- ◆ It's traditional to do divination on this night
- ◆ The Guanyin Oracle comes from the Ming dynasty and is a collection of brief poems; traditionally the diviner determines which poem the petitioner gets, but we print each poem inside a folded card, place all the cards in a bowl, and each person chooses one (A version of the poems is in Appendix B)
- ◆ Have everyone focus for a moment, then pass the bowl around so that each person can pick one
- ◆ Meditate on the oracle
- ◆ Optional : People share their oracle and comment on it

Ring the temple bell 108 times at midnight

- ◆ Just before 12:00, so that the tolling will cross midnight, people go outside one at a time to strike the bell, and then return to the hall
- ◆ Holder of the Ceremony or Cantor does a quick calculation of the maximum number of strikes each person can make, and lets everyone know
- ◆ Holder or Cantor keeps track and goes last, bringing the count to 108

Holder performs a new year's water blessing

Refreshments

We have a New Year's Eve custom in our school of reading poetry that people have brought for the occasion to each other

