SETSUBUN

On February 3, 2010, people throughout Japan celebrated Setsubun, a celebration honoring the changing of seasons. Setsubun occurs the day before the beginning of spring. Setsubun generally always precedes the lunar New Year, and in the ancient times was often actually referred to as New Years’ Eve. In 2008, solar and lunar cycles coincided enough to make the old tradition almost real in that February 4th marked Risshun (Spring Begins), and February 7th was the actual lunar New Year in both China and Japan. In 2010, Setsubun precedes the Lunar New Year (February 14) by about ten days.

Setsubun has been celebrated in many ways, but perhaps the most common custom found throughout Japan is the traditional Mame Maki or the scattering/throwing of beans (mame) to chase away the evil oni (ogres, evil spirits, as depicted in the illustration which heads this article). In some ritual forms, the Toshi Otoko [literally ‘year man’ but referring either to the ‘man of the house’ or to men who are born in the animal sign of the coming year (tiger for the year 2010) will throw mame within the house or at someone perhaps dressed as oni and repeat the saying Oni wa Soto; Fuku wa Uchi (Get out Ogre! Come in Happiness!). After the ritual throwing of the beans, family members may then pick up the number of beans corresponding to their age; eating these brings assurance of good fortune in the coming year. These days, of course, it is not uncommon to see children dressed in masks of oni, others madly throwing beans, and all gleefully shouting for evil to hit the road. Prominent temples in Japan may also find monks or celebrities showering large crowds of people with mame to ward off spirits and welcome the renewal of the coming New Year.

This year, the Houston Sangha participated in a special Lunar New Year celebration with the Ligmincha Institute at the Rothko Chapel. Our sangha member, Meri Eckhoff, played the part of the Demon and was heavily pelted with soy beans, amidst much laughter. Ligmincha’s Alejandro Chaoul and Geshe Denma Gyaltsen led a beautiful Sangcho Smoke Ritual, a ritual much like our efforts to drive out negativity and bring in a great New Year. It was truly a beautiful and fun day!
April is an important month for us as Nichiren Buddhists. We will mark the Buddha’s birthday as well as the day Nichiren Shonin first chanted the Odaimoku. I will also be taking on two novices on April 3, Luis from Costa Rica and Michael from New York. This will be an incredible journey, one which will stretch not only me, but the two shami as well. I feel a good bit of excitement as well as a sense of trepidation.

This issue features an interview with Jarvis Jay Masters about his new book “That Bird Has My Wings.” I must say I was really moved by his book which reveals a great deal about his journey to death row and his subsequent inner journey to Buddhism. It is quite powerful. I hope you enjoy it.

Some of what Masters discusses in this interview provide inspiration for serious contemplation. We often hear about spiritual contemplation or meditation. In Nichiren Shu, spiritual contemplation can take various forms, but generally we can say that it involves contemplation of one’s mind, one’s heart, one’s life—all of which are a unity—they are inseparable.

A passage in the Lotus Sutra on the purpose of the Buddha’s appearing in the world “was to cause all living beings to open their gates to the insight of the Buddha.” T’ien-tai said, “If the insight of the Buddha does not exist in all living being, how can he open the gate to it? You should know from this that the insight of the Buddha is inherent in the minds of all living beings.” [Kanjin Honzon Sho, WNS, Doctrine 2:142]

I believe this is something to consider deeply, especially as many of us do not believe that we possess such ‘insight.’ If we cannot contemplate having such insight, we may fail to walk the path as if we deserved to be there. We might even be afraid to extend our hands, our hearts, or our minds to receive the insight of the Buddha. And what does “insight of the Buddha” really mean, anyway?

I like to think that it means coming to terms with what the Buddha was awakened to: the reality of all things.

SHUKKE TOKUDO: First Step to the Priesthood

On April 3, 2010, two men, Michael Sebastian Lefebvre [now “Keishun”] and Luis Antonio Calderon Vargas [now “Ekan] took the first steps toward becoming priests in the Nichiren Shu Order, by participating in the Shukke Tokudo ceremony. Shukke means “leaving home” or “one who has renounced homelife to become a monk or nun.” Tokudo means “to attain the way to enlightenment.” So the ceremony represents the point of departure or “leaving home to attain enlightenment.”

The next step is the docho registration ceremony which marks the official registration of a shami with the Nichiren Shu Order. This special ceremony occurs at Seicho-ji Temple at Mt. Kiyosumi in Kominato, Japan. Seicho-ji is the place where Nichiren Shonin himself took his first vows and became a shami. It is also the location of Asahigamori, a spot on Mt. Kiyosumi, where Nichiren Shonin chanted the Odaimoku for the first time. I participated in my own docho ceremony there on April 4, 2007 and later attended sodorin (a training program) there. While in Japan for docho, Faulconer Shonin and my two shami brothers and I were able to travel to many sites important in Nichiren Shonin’s life.

While the future date for this formal registration ceremony is not on the horizon at this time, it will occur sometime within the next few years. In the meantime, both shami will be studying and training to prepare themselves for the priesthood. It is the time when one must focus deep within to uncover any impediments to being of service to others and fulfilling the function of a priest.

The ceremony was conducted with the joyful and very competent support of Faulconer Shonin, Kumakura Shonin, and Gaelyn Setsuan Godwin, Roshi of the Houston Zen Center. Ekan was accompanied by his wife, Ileana, on their journey from San Jose, Costa Rica. Keishun came in from New York where he is a student at the City University of New York. His mother was also in attendance as were his friends. It was a great day for all involved.

Generally speaking, a shami takes on a Buddhist name which includes a part of his teacher’s name. My name consists of two characters, Myo and Kei. Myo is traditionally used for women, and since both my disciples are males, was not considered suitable. Kumakura Shonin suggested using the character Kei and helped to find two suitable names. Keishun means excellence through prajna or wisdom and Ekan means the wisdom to carry out one’s original intention. What this illustrates so clearly is that the process of developing and training shami is not a solitary endeavor. All current ministers tend to engage in supporting this journey to ensure that the shami is well-rounded. It is much in keeping with that saying “it takes a village to raise a child.” We could say “it takes a sangha to raise a priest.”
I suddenly realized the responsibility I had in telling their stories, and what it all could possibly mean, to benefit those lost and troubled kids who are out there now; that telling my stories might somehow change their direction. But more important, my hope is that this memoir gets in the hands of the many professionals who truly care and feel a personal responsibility for doing everything possible in preventing and protecting these kids from becoming lost and abandoned in the system. I know it takes the heartfelt willingness of those dedicated and committed adults to provide greater opportunities to change the direction for youth in similar life circumstances. And I hope this book about my life story will contribute to that in some way.

Your mother, who battled an addiction to heroin and appeared only intermittently throughout your life, nonetheless had a profound impact on you. How do you feel about her today?

There’s no question about the love I will always have for my mother. I love my mother dearly and she will forever have an impact on me. I can easily see into the lives of other kids who grew up along side of me, or even kids today who for whatever reason are living without their mothers, the reasons we share for always loving them.

Your entire family played a major role in shaping who and where you are today. Are you currently in touch with any of them?

I have stayed in touch with them mostly through one sister who writes and visits occasionally.

Your first foster family, the Procks, introduced you to Christianity by bringing you to church on Sundays. Today you are a practicing Buddhist. How did your early experiences at church shape your spirituality today?

Yes, my only real experience with Christianity was at the home of my first foster family, the Procks. Everything I had truly accepted about Christ and Christianity came from the unconditional love and care I had received from them. My spirit soared.

Your friends from various juvenile detention centers, boys’ homes, and jails also play a significant part in your story. Are you still in touch with any of them? How have they fared relative to you?

Sadly, many are locked up in the prison system. They are mostly the guys who are strolling hard in the prison exercise yards. They walk the line as we had been always raised to do. And yet I’m hoping that there are others, more than might be imagined, who have fared well, especially by what real chances they might have had. I know in my heart there are those who have found their own determined way and have made their lives better.

You unearthed some painful memories while writing your memoir. Do you have any lingering resentment, and do you hold anyone (or anything) to blame?
I cannot think of any greater pain than for me to write this memoir in order to blame someone, anyone! To what purpose? I’m not even sure I would have known how to do this. My only challenge was to give truth to my writing. Yes, it was a painful experience, but a healing one as well.

You have arguably made a significant transformation from an angry, violent youth to a peaceful, benevolent adult. And yet you say you never changed who you were, but rather “reclaimed” your inner goodness while on death row. What was it that triggered this turnaround?

It was the patience I had to find to sit and meditate. The journey of finding freedom while waiting on death row was essentially all about reclaiming that inner-goodness. Buddhist teachings taught me that, fundamentally, there wasn’t anything really bad about me or the others I grew up with. Through meditation, I held onto the idea that I could reclaim the child I had been—that boy who became lost in the system. Through that practice I was allowing who I am now to go far back to reclaim that sense of inner-goodness that had been lost. We can see this goodness in every child, if we just look.

What are the challenges of practicing Buddhism while on death row? How is meditation possible, and if so, how does it affect your daily interactions and experiences?

For the most part, I think most of the challenges I face are much like they are anywhere else. The obstacles come and go; be it the noise or craziness in one’s day, the lack of interest because you would rather be doing something else, or even the fact that you are a Buddhist! This could be the most challenging, and I’ve gotten a lot of flack for that in prison, as you can imagine. But Buddhism has helped me so much to see myself and others more clearly. It has brought me freedom. It has brought me peace.

When did you start writing and why? Were you hoping to share your story with a wider audience, or were you writing for therapeutic/personal reasons?

When I first started writing, it was as if I had discovered my inner voice, not only in a way I had not before, but in a way that could offer my life a kind of existence not beholden to San Quentin. It was a means to extend my inner world beyond the gates and towers, the crazed noise in cell blocks and all the time I had on my hands. It was probably in 1987 that I started to learn to write about small things in prison, and my life in relation to them, the various convicts, that irritating sound of the “spikes,” keys ringing off the hips of guards, etc. But after some years, I slowly began writing, almost therapeutically, about my life. And while much of it evoked a lot of painful emotions poring over, it was also healing. From those small beginnings, my writings turned very slowly to this memoir of my life story.

How can one be a writer on death row? What means do you have at your disposal, and how much [if any] quiet time can you find to contemplate, reflect, and write?

Becoming a writer really begins wherever anyone chooses to start. I do believe that being in a place like San Quentin’s death row can be humanly overwhelming because of all the thoughts inside one’s own head to contemplate and reflect on, and the hollering all around you. But there’s no real quiet time in prison for writing. In most cases, noise is the invaluable start to the truth. It could be, and I know it is for some, that the only real means you have to use is a pen or pencil, sheets of paper, and the voice within your own heart.

Both of my books were written while I spent many years in solitary confinement, and the only writing instrument I was allowed is a “pen filler”, the inside of a ball point pen. (The hard plastic cylinder could conceivably be used as a weapon, so the prison authorities take that off before giving an inmate a pen.) Over the days and months that I wrote this memoir, I went through so many pen fillers. I speak to this process more in the book. But now I have a typewriter that I had to learn how to use and have gotten pretty good at it!

Pema Chödrön, a bestselling author and personal friend, calls you a “role model” for many children and adolescents out there. How can you serve as a role model while sitting on death row?

I am not sure about a “role model,” but what I’ve discovered out of my own life circumstances can hopefully be used to benefit others. I mean, we are all human beings, and no matter where we are, if we can help someone, that’s a good thing! In my first book, Finding Freedom, I wrote of my own self-discovery, how my spiritual practice had often helped me out of situations where, without it, I might have never been able to see a way to be of help to myself or to someone else. I guess, in a sense, my own imperfections and the mistakes I made are my credentials for giving what I might now have, let’s say, to a juvenile counselor, because I’ve been through the system and can identify with those kids who may be following in my path.

I believe we are all expected to give something back. I hope that the publication of That Bird Has My Wings does everything possible to prevent abused or ignored children and adolescents from ending their lives or entering a 4’ x 9’ prison cell, the likes of San Quentin, and instead enables them to live out the rest of their natural lives in freedom.

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