

Bon Time Odori

Bon Odori season is upon us again, one of the few truly Nikkei cultural traditions. For Jodoshinshu Buddhists, it is **not** about the souls of our ancestors returning to this world, as non-Buddhists seem to insist that it is. For us, it is our annual expression of indebtedness and joy in reconnecting to our past and people who inhabit our past. It is called Kangi-e, "the Gathering of Joy" – a memorial for the dead, a mixture of melancholy and affirmation of life.

This culminates in the Bon Odori, the Bon dance, named after the Ullambana Sutra (Obon in Japanese) where the familiar story of Mogallana and his dead mother is told. When Mogallana resolves the death of his mother, he dances in joy – the first Bon Odori. Bon Odori is thus a dance of spiritual joy seated in an understanding of life/death. Because of this, Bon odori must be an egoless dance; not showing off ones skill at dancing, not being embarrassed to dance for lack of skill, not dressing up impress, not dressing down to impress, but to **just dance**. When one **just dances**, it is then, and only then, that one thinks of someone who has passed on. Until that moment, one is too full of oneself to think of someone other than the self. That moment of just dancing is a connective moment. Connected to what? Connected to reality, connected to Amida Buddha and the Pure Land. And then we return to the world of self-centered Namo. Thus Namoamidabutsu is the quintessential statement of human beings at their best and worst, at the same time. It is a connective moment worth considering. If you find yourself flaunting your talents while dancing – never mind, just continue dancing. If you are uneasy because you don't know the dance – never mind, keep dancing. Sooner or later, you will have a moment of **just dancing**, where the search for meaning disappears, replaced by your connection to all things living and dead.



On the level of music, mainland temples have traditionally used recorded music of Japanese folk songs of two musical forms, ondo and bushi. Ondo means “to take the lead” as in taking the lead in a group cheer, a toast, and in this case, a solo singer backed up by other voices singing a refrain or kakegoe. Bushi is a narrative song about a famous location or person or people sung either in solo or group. Ondo does not mean dance, but rather a kind of music often used in the Bon dance. Hence we do not refer to our dances as Ondo but rather Bon Odori. The word Ondo was coined by non-Buddhist J-A’s who, not familiar with Bon Odori or Japanese, mistakenly took Ondo to mean “dance” and used the term Street Ondo for their non-Buddhist aversion of Bon Odori.

Bon Odori taiko also needs some explanation. Unlike Japanese-American Taiko groups, Bon Odori taiko is an entirely different kind of drumming is attitude and spirit. Bon Odori taiko is not a performance taiko, but rather a taiko that supports the song and the dancers. It is composed of sparsely spaced beats to emphasize high points in the song and accent the movement of the dancers. The taiko player must know the music of each dance piece. In this sense, a skilled taiko player in a group taiko context is not necessarily qualified to play Bon Odori taiko. Group taiko is theater or performance taiko, where the audience is to watch the taiko performance, hence the rhythms are continuous and dynamic. Bon Odori taiko is to support the music and dance, not to overpower it. A skillful Bon Odori taiko player is not in the forefront and more noticed by his absence than his presence. Bon Odori taiko requires a kind of selflessness in order to connect harmoniously with the music or musician and the dancer.



In Bon Odori the dance, music, and taiko; one’s dress and knowledge or non-knowledge of the dances have a consistency stemming from a distinctly Japanese-American Buddhist religious attitude. In short, Bon odori is meant to be danced not observed, and in that dancing, to connect with the reality of life and death, with Namoamidabutsu. It is a living out of the Bon odori refrain:

<i>A fool dancing, a fool watching</i>	<i>Odoru aho ni miru aho</i>
<i>If in any case you are a fool</i>	<i>Onaji aho nara</i>
<i>What a loss not to dance</i>	<i>Odorannya son son</i>

If your body can no longer dance, sit down and dance with your eyes, your ears, and your heart – don’t just sit and watch.

Yoi Yoi

Gassho,

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