

RYAKU FUSATSU—THE FULL MOON CEREMONY

by Sheryl Gyonyo Hamilton

The sun has set. It is dark. Time for a little moonlight. It is the third Thursday of the month, time for *Ryaku Fusatsu*, the Full Moon Ceremony of Atonement. Traditionally, this ceremony is held at the full moon, which helps set the tone.

We celebrated Fusatsu at Ango this past August, and Roshi asked me to write a brief article about it. He wanted to encourage the Sangha to come up to Genjo-ji and participate in this very beautiful Zen tradition. Roshi said that he really wants the Sangha members to experience this ceremony. He believes that it is essential for our practice. I have found it to be deeply enriching, in surprising ways, for my own practice. I hope you will too.

There is no evil karma. Karma does not really exist. Separated, individuated consciousness does not really exist. But we tend to think it does. This is the fundamental error in understanding that human beings can make. And if we are making this error, which most of us are, participating in *Fusatsu* can be a very helpful practice.

Quoting from Chapter IX of Red Pine's translation of the Lankavatara Sutra, here is some verse from Shakyamuni on karma:

*Blue and red and other colors
Can't be found in any wave
We say the mind gathers karma
To awaken foolish beings*

*But karma isn't real
Thus, to make their minds let go
What grasps and what is grasped
I liken it to waves*

*Their body, possessions, and the world
This is what they're conscious of
This is how their karma appears
Just like surging waves*

We believe we have a body. We identify with our thoughts. We believe we are separate from each other and that we can make mistakes, that we can hurt people. This is not the whole truth. Actually, we are all Buddha-mind or Buddha-heart, completely connected and one. However, it can seem as if we are separate and that we make mistakes. And we can feel the effects of these "mistakes" lodged in our bodies and minds as tendencies of thought and correlated physical tension or sensation, which I imagine we have all experienced at one point or other. Habits of mind. *Ryaku Fusatsu* helps in clearing out some of these mental patterns and corresponding sensations. So, until we realize Buddha-mind or Buddha-heart, ceremonies like *Ryaku Fusatsu* serve to encourage us and elevate our practice.



The essential intention of the ceremony is to recommit ourselves to our own personal liberation and the liberation of all beings, which are really the same thing. We are re-awakening to our original state, of nirvana. When we say "liberation" in Buddhism, what we mean is emancipation from the idea of a separate self, and then subsequent identification with the truth of Buddha-nature. *Fusatsu* is yet another way that our teacher can aid us with our practice in realization and liberation. Really, we are already liberated. *Fusatsu* allows us to re-realize it.

The ceremony is simple and consists of chanting, prostrations, and *choki* (kneeling position), blessing from the teacher, and vows. At the end, we take the three refuges. If you are anything like me, and you don't come from a religious tradition with a lot of liturgical forms, you might find this ceremony daunting at first. But I encourage you to stay in for the win. This formal ritual is an important part of practice, so it is worth jumping right in. When in doubt, you can always copy someone else. It is definitely a group activity. And a powerful opportunity to participate physically in our own liberation, and the liberation of all beings.

The first verse we chant is a verse of atonement. Roshi says that "atonement" should be read as "at-one-ment." As in, we are returning to one. It isn't that we really have anything to atone for. It expresses our intention to go back to "at one". This is the verse:

*All the evil karma committed by me since of old,
Because of my beginningless greed, anger, and ignorance,
Born of my body, mouth, and thought,
Now I atone for it all*

This expresses our ability and will to relieve ourselves of our karmic debt. There is really no karma—but we think there is. So as long as we think there is, this activity of chanting is very important.

After this chant, which can be very powerful and mov-

ing, we chant the Buddha's names: past seven Buddhas, Shakyamuni Buddha, Maitreya, Manjusri, Samantabhadra, Avalokitesvara and the Successive Ancestors are all invoked. Which tends to elevate the tone of the ceremony.

Then we recite the four vows, and Roshi offers incense. The next part of the ceremony, probably my favorite part, is when Roshi sprinkles everyone with wisdom water (shassui). At Ango, sacred water from the temple of the 6th Ancestor Daikan Eno is used, so this is a special part of the ceremony. It is so good to receive this blessing. There is something very sweet and intimate about being blessed by Roshi in this way. It is important to stay present as this is happening and not dissociate from the experience. It is a big one to receive in the moment.

Then Roshi reads Bodhidharma's One-Mind Precepts with everyone in gassho, which again affirms our unity with Buddha-mind or Buddha-heart.

To end the ceremony, we chant the four vows and three refuges together.

I guess I have participated in this ceremony at every Ango I have been to. And over time I have noticed that it does mysteriously affect my practice. I can't really say I know why it works, but I know for sure that it does. It is a deceptively simple and deep ceremony. Kind of like gentle karmic surgery. But nothing is removed. Everything is recovered and preserved, not lost.

To make an analogy, we Zen students are all stuck in the "egg" of our ego—ego being the idea of an individual self. The ego is needed for human development. It is a necessary stage in becoming, just like an egg. However, eventually the egg shell becomes too small. We need to break out of it, so we start tapping on the inside of the egg, like a baby bird who is ready to walk and then fly. Tap, tap, tap. Our teacher hears the tapping and knows when we are ready, and gently pushes us to break out of the egg. This ceremony expresses beautifully that stage of the teacher-student relationship. We are tapping—further developing—and our teacher helps us break out with precision and perfect timing. This ceremony expresses, in a physical way, our readiness, and his willingness to help us. It refreshes our resolve and determination, which in turn helps our practice.

I hope you can make it up to Genjo-ji for *Ryaku Fusatsu* soon, so you can receive Roshi's blessing and make this vow of atonement for your own liberation and for the liberation of all beings. ❖