



THE BUDDHIST TEMPLE OF CHICAGO

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JUNE 2020 BULLETIN

For this month as with last month, we are sending you a shortened version of our bulletin. Due to the hazards of going to the bulk mail section of the downtown post office, we are not mailing out this bulletin except to about 5% of our mailing list – local members without computer access.

Please note that the temple will be continued to be closed to all activities through the month of June. We will monitor the local situation with COVID-19 spread and will be discussing how we can reopen the temple safely in phases. Even after we reopen on a limited basis, we will continue to offer Sunday services and discussions online.

We appreciate that many of you have continued to make donations by mail or on our website. We also are grateful for the members who have taken it upon themselves to check up on our senior members who are homebound or in nursing homes. If you need assistance or know someone who needs help during this lockdown time, please let us know because there are temple members willing to assist where needed.

Please visit our website: buddhisttemplechicago.org
or our Facebook page for updates.

We greatly appreciate your continuing support of our temple and hope you are all keeping well.

ONLINE Activities – schedule subject to changes and cancelations

Please note Thursday evening Facebook Live meditation is on break until September.

Sundays at 11am – Facebook Live service (June 14 is a Dharma School service)

Sundays at 12 noon – Virtual social hour on Zoom

Tuesdays at 11am – Mindful Midday (brief meditation and exercise) on Zoom

Wednesdays at 4:30pm – “Buddhism in the Movies” on Zoom

Monthly study class “Treasured Teachings” on Zoom (schedule TBD)

Special Event on Zoom – June 27 Saturday seminar with Prof. Melissa Curley

For detailed information about using Facebook Live and/or Zoom,
please contact Rev. Patti: rev.eshin.patti23@gmail.com

Accommodations will be made for families requesting memorial services (see article on page 2). This applies to any small-scale memorial service – 1 year, 3rd memorial etc.

In Deepest Sympathy to the family of:

Anna Toshiko Nagata

April 14, 2020

Conducting an Online Memorial Service By Rev. Patti Nakai

[This is an expanded version of the article that was posted on the Higashi Honganji USA website. Details are supplied with permission of the Sameshima family.]

During this time of pandemic and social distancing, I'm writing about this experience of conducting an online memorial service so people know our temple will do what we can to ensure a proper service for loved ones who pass away or for important memorial dates. In a recent article on the Higashi Honganji USA website, Rev. Ken Yamada wrote of an increasing tendency for families to plan non-religious "celebrations of life" when a loved one passes away. Yet some Buddhist families feel a great need for a solemn ceremony emphasizing the spiritual aspects of honoring a deceased family member.

How can this be done when we are under a stay-at-home order because of the highly contagious Corona virus? Funeral homes and religious organizations now are starting to use online technology to bring people together to hear and see each other, even if they're physically in separate places. This can be accomplished through various technologies incorporating different software programs and equipment.

When our longtime member Mrs. Tsuneko Sameshima passed away, her husband, Mr. Saburo Sameshima, and their two daughters, Susan and Betsy, contacted the temple to discuss having a service. I thought of arranging an online pre-cremation (*kaso-shiki*) last viewing service with the funeral home and family. However, since Mrs. Sameshima tested positive for Covid-19, the last viewing service, according to the funeral home, would present a health risk for everyone unless the family proceeded with embalming. So, the family's decision was to first cremate and then have a seventh day memorial service which included her urn with her name inscribed.

Not being able to finally see her just added to the sadness. Mrs. Sameshima was living in a nursing home and for the three weeks prior, no visitors, including family, were allowed to enter the nursing home due to Illinois state mandated Covid-19 precautions. When she became sick and was rushed to the hospital, again, no visitors were allowed at the hospital. Family members were not allowed to be with her before and after she passed away at the hospital. After her passing, the doctor notified the family that her test results were back and she was positive for Covid-19. The hardest part for the family was knowing that her health was declining rapidly and that she was alone amongst strangers. They were not able to hold her hand and tell her that they loved her and say their final goodbyes.

With our temple Zoom video conferencing account, we coordinated streaming from four different locations - the funeral home, my home and Susan and Betsy's homes. The screen view from the funeral home showed a Buddhist altar setup with incense burner and candle on a draped table with Mrs. Sameshima's inscribed urn, her framed photo and flower arrangements. Mr. Sameshima with Susan's family were streaming from one house and Betsy's family was streaming from their house. Even though they do not live far apart, they were still practicing social distancing and streamed separately. Each group set up a table with a framed photo of Mrs. Sameshima and flower arrangements. The camera of their computer was facing the family seated in rows in their chairs. All the family members were able to see all four quadrants of the Zoom stream and watched all the participants of the entire service on their computer screen.

In this age, when people do video conference meetings wearing casual clothes or even their pajamas, I was impressed that everyone who attended the online memorial service was dressed in formal funeral wear – men and boys in black suits; women and girls in black dresses.
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Following the standard memorial service, I opened with chanting the Three Treasures in Pali and presented the Dharma Name, placing the paper in front of the photograph of our temple's altar. Then I did sutra chanting as the members of the two families in lieu of incense offering, came up one-by-one to offer a white rose to their own photo of Mrs. Tsuneko Sameshima. They followed the formal order with Mr. Saburo Sameshima going first as the chief mourner followed by each member of Susan's family. Next, members of Betsy's family did their offering.

Then as I would do at a normal service, I faced the family members and formally read Rennyō Shonin's letter, "White Ashes," which was written 500 years ago and now is traditionally read at funerals and memorial services. Afterwards, I stood up and gave a Dharma message to the grieving families.

Although I have no scientific proof, I told them that Mrs. Sameshima somehow could feel her family was with her in those last moments of her life, even if they physically couldn't be at her side. Susan and Betsy had told me they feared their mother must have felt abandoned because no one came to the nursing home and the hospital. In ways we can't explain rationally, I said, Mrs. Sameshima surely understood why you couldn't be there, but in her heart, surely felt your presence in spirit.

I've seen close friends and family members become anxious as death approached, but as they lost consciousness, their faces always showed a sense of peacefulness. In those last moments, they seemed to be freed from worries and fears, knowing they're embraced by a larger Life that includes loved ones past and present. In that sense, I don't think it was a stretch for me to assure the daughters their mother did not feel abandoned by her family when she died.

After my talk, we recited together the nembutsu, the words "Namu Amida Butsu." For remembrances, each of the family members including her five grandchildren stood up and offered dear words of appreciation to Mrs. Tsuneko Sameshima. For them, participating and feeling part of the ceremony were important, making the online service a touching experience and dignified way of parting with a loved one that I think a celebration of life sorely lacks.

I don't think an online memorial service could ever provide the same feeling of intimacy as bringing everyone together in one place before an altar with a loved one's remains. But the family of Mrs. Sameshima and the funeral home helped me feel that this online service was the best approximation possible, given the restrictions we are living with. I give the family much credit for wanting to do this ceremony despite the tricky technology involved (it took a while for all of us to get audio and video connected on our computers).

By taking this important ritual with all the seriousness of a traditional ceremony, the family made this improvised online service function as a structured occasion to mourn and reflect, giving a sense of order to their days filled with shocked thoughts and sad feelings, made even more stressful with the pervasive threat of the virus that had taken their loved one. At this time of high anxiety, we don't need a celebration of life as much as we need the solemnity of traditional Buddhist rituals and teachings, even if they're online.

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