

BACKGROUND OF BON ODORI (OBON DANCES)

As Buddhist legend goes, Mogallana, a disciple of Buddha, who had a meditative vision, saw his mother suffering in the World of Hungry Ghosts (a type of hell) . Buddha told him how to save her by providing a feast for the monks. Upon doing so his mother was saved and he danced for joy. This became the origin of Bon Odori.

In Japan it is a time when the souls of ancestors return home. Homes are lighted with lanterns to help them find their way. Then they are sent off with lighted lanterns in small boats. This latter tradition is observed at the Portland Japanese Garden.

Jodo Shinshuists (Oregon Buddhist Temple) do not believe in a soul but for them Obon is a time to appreciate what our ancestors have done for us and to recognize the continuation of their deeds upon our lives. It is often called “a gathering of joy.”

Bon Odori was popular in rural Japan before the Meiji era (1868-1912) but was discouraged during that period because the all night dancing and drinking encouraged immoral behavior. It became popular again in the Taisho era (1912 to 1926) at which time new dances and music were created. The first recorded Bon Odori in this country was held in San Francisco in 1931. Today it is a popular summer event in many Buddhist communities. As one minister said, “Just dance, just as we are, no conniving, no calculating, no image protecting or flaunting.”

The Oregon Buddhist Temple Obonfest will be held on Saturday, August 7, 2010 from 3 to 9 pm. Featured will be the well-known Portland Taiko. There will be other entertainment, food, a gift shop and a children’s booth. Dancing will start at 6:30 pm.

The public is invited to free dance practices at the temple every Tuesday and Thursday at 7:00 pm from July 20 through August 5, 2010. No prior knowledge or experience is necessary. The temple is located at 3720 SE 34th Avenue, one block south of Powell Boulevard.