

A Lesson in Okagesama

One of the most beautiful and meaningful expressions in Japanese is the word, "Okagesama." In normal Japanese, this is a polite expression that one would use to show thanks, gratitude, and humility. Let's say you were the chairperson for the temple bazaar fundraiser, and after the event, everyone told you what a good job you did and how successful the fundraiser was. In Japanese, you might say, "Okagesama de," meaning, thanks to all the hard work of everyone, the bazaar was a great success." In saying "Okagesama," you are acknowledging the efforts of everyone, more than yourself, as the chairperson. In sports, it would be like winning a championship, and the ESPN reporter asks you, the star player, how do you feel after winning the MVP award for the game, you might humbly say, "But it was a real team effort. The whole team, and coaches, and fans, we all did it. It wasn't just me."

I think that for all of us, this Corona-virus ordeal has been a tremendous lesson in Okagesama, to see how thanks to the efforts of so many others, I am allowed to live. I even hear newscasters and celebrities saying how they feel deep gratitude to the health care workers, the store workers, the bus drivers, the garbage collectors, the farmers, the store shelf stockers, and on and on, for helping all of us through this unprecedented time that we are experiencing.

Buddhism has been trying to awaken us to that fact our whole life. Maybe you have heard your local minister give a sermon on Okagesama before, maybe many times even. Maybe you thought to yourself, "Yeah, yeah, we've heard this one before...many times. I get it. Yeah, we should be grateful. Okay."

But suddenly, this Coronavirus has really made us awaken to the world of Okagesama, that we did not see, nor appreciate before. Not only that, but now I see the whole world awakening to this truth, this teaching of Okagesama.

My wife and I are both in the age 65 and over category, that is supposed to stay home and not even go to the store. Our daughter won't let us go to the store. She insists that she go get the groceries. Sometimes she gets a whole car load of groceries and supplies that we want to "stock up on."

This Coronavirus has been a terrible thing for all of us, for the whole world even, to go through. But it has been a universal lesson in awakening to the world of Okagesama, for not only we Buddhists, but for everyone.

As we continue to face the challenges, the inconveniences, the frustrations, the disappointments, even the pain that this pandemic has caused us, let us not lose sight of what it has awakened us to. If we continue to awaken and realize amidst this pandemic, then we will not look at this time as a loss, as a waste, as a pain in the neck, but instead we will see the deeper truths that this experience has given us, and we can say in gratitude,

Namuamidabutsu.

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