

Absolution

By Sally Brown

At Pine Mountain Temple last March, a Segaki Ceremony was held. It was a beautiful, warm day, and a small but diverse Sangha came together cheerfully. They sang well and performed a good qwatz. A good time was had by all.

During the ceremony, the word 'Absolution' came into mind, and because this is not a term used often in Buddhism, I took a closer look. What came up is the following: Segaki is a ceremony for the dead who are suffering and cannot find peace or move on to another world. The hungry ghosts are suffering due to past actions, cravings, or desires. But rarely in Buddhism is there an "us and them" situation. So I looked for what part I might be playing in someone else's suffering.

It begins with telling stories. Stories of my past and the role someone played in it. How many times have I explained myself with the excuse "My parents did such and such, and therefore I am the way I am"? The story may have happened the way I remembered it or not, but for sure the moment has past and the feelings around it – the story – needs to be released. If I hold onto someone's mistake, make it into a story, and tell it to myself or others, could this be binding that person's spirit in an endless desire for forgiveness? Do my stories somehow keep them from moving on? And myself as well?

I decided to examine a childhood story and let it go. I looked at it, forgave the person for their mistake and asked for their forgiveness. I invited them to the ceremonial feast and said good-bye, not to their memory but to the stories. It was time to let go. It was a form of absolution – for both of us.

I realize that forgiving and asking for forgiveness is not always easy or even possible. For now I apply what I've learned when a story comes up in meditation or I hear myself telling one. I do what I can do with the past, and I look at what incidents in daily life might be creating stories around the living and try and let them go. It is all part of training, and there is much help from the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha.