

# 2020 PHILADELPHIA OBON FESTIVAL



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**WHAT IS OBON?**





## WHAT IS OBON?

Obon, or the less formal Bon, festival is a Japanese Buddhist way to honor and commemorate the spirits of your ancestors. Those from the U.S. may liken the feeling of this holiday with Thanksgiving. A major aspect of Obon is a reunion of family to their ancestral or family home, where the spirits of ancestors will return from the 13th to the 15th day of the 7th month of the year. Stemming from Japan changing it's lunar-based calendar to the solar-based Gregorian Calendar that we recognize today, this time period is interpreted differently depending on the region in Japan, creating three different times of observing the holiday.





# When is Obon?

Shichigatsu Bon (Bon in July) is based on the solar calendar and is celebrated around the 15th of July in the majority of eastern Japan, including some parts of the Kantō region like Tokyo and Yokohama, and the Tōhoku region. Hachigatsu Bon (Bon in August), based on the lunar calendar, is celebrated around the 15th of August and is the most commonly celebrated time. Kyū Bon (Old Bon) is celebrated on the 15th day of the seventh month of the original lunar calendar, and so the specific days differ each year, but falls between August 8 and September 7. Occasionally 'Old Bon' and 'Bon in August' will match up and be celebrated on the same day, as seen in 2008 and last year, 2019. Kyū Bon is celebrated in areas such as the northern part of the Kantō region, Chūgoku region, Shikoku, and Okinawa Prefecture.

# How did Obon begin?

Like many holidays, Obon is said to have been inspired by a story. In the story, a Buddhist disciple uses his supernatural powers to contact his deceased mother. However, upon doing so he realizes that she's been suffering within the 'Realm of Hungry Ghosts', which as the name suggests, are ghosts that are suffering with an insatiable hunger. The disciple goes to Buddha for help in freeing her spirit and is told to prepare offerings of food to the buddhist monks returning from their summer retreat. He does so and her spirit is freed from the pain of hunger. The triumphant descendant then dances in joy. The actual holiday and many of its customs as observed today are evolutions from this story. The name Obon is the Japanese shortening of the Sanskrit word Ullambana, which means 'hanging upside down', to portray the idea of suffering. The customs of Obon serve to free ancestral spirits from suffering.





## What happens during Obon?

Obon starts out with families visiting and cleaning ancestral graves, and placing lanterns known as Chochin at their resting places and ancestral homes to guide them back home. ‘Horses’ made of a cucumber and wooden sticks for legs, and ‘cows’ made of eggplant and wooden sticks, are left on the porch as vessels for the ancestors to use to ride from their spirit world, to ours, and back (more on this in our Cucumber Horse and Eggplant Cow craft). Offerings made up of the ancestors favorite foods and drinks are also made and eaten by the family, together

Many towns hold festivals during the day with food, rides, games, and more. Not necessarily an activity specific to Obon but is often played during these Obon festivals is a game called suikawari, or watermelon splitting. A whole watermelon is placed on a tarp or sheet and people take turns hitting it with a stick while blindfolded, similar to hitting a piñata but in a downward slamming motion instead of horizontal swing. Festival-goers also participate in Bon Odori (Bon dance), which sees participants dancing in unison in a circle formation (read more details on this in our Bon Odori Info Sheet).

Lastly, the ancestors are sent back to their spirit world through fire rituals known as Okuribi, or sending fire. This custom takes shape in various ways depending on the region as well. The most famous send-off is the Daimonji in Kyoto. Daimonji literally means ‘large character’, and refers to five large fires set on mountains surrounding the town, each in the shape of a Japanese kanji character, kanji being the primary writing system in Japan. Another popular Okuribi is to float a lantern down a river towards the sea.



# OBON VOCABLUARY

**Obon** - Short for Urabone, which is the Japanese word stemming from the Sanskrit word, Ullambana. It means 'hanging upside down', to signify suffering. Obon is about freeing ancestors from suffering.

**Gatsu** - a Japanese suffix meaning 'month'. Put a number in front of it to make the whole word (i.e. hachigatsu).

**Shichi, hachi, kyuu** - 7, 8, and old, or older times, respectively.

**Chouchin** - Paper Lanterns, used to guide spirits home.

**Shoryoma** - Spiritual Conveyances, what the Cucumber Horse and Eggplant Cows are considered.

**Suikawari** - Watermelon Splitting, referring to a game similar to piñata.

**Bon Odori** - Bon Dance, during Obon towns all across Japan have their own variations of music and dance.

**Okuribi** - Fire rituals to send off your ancestors using various methods involving fire.

**Daimonji** - Literally means 'large character', refers to famous Okuribi performed in Kyoto in which large fires in the shapes of Japanese kanji (writing system) characters are lit on the sides of surrounding mountains.

**Toro Nagashi** - Lanterns with a lit candle in the middle, sent down the river towards the ocean to symbolically send spirits into the sky.





# OBON AT SHOFUSO







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