

## The Auspicious Seventh Lunar Month

Written by Master Cheng Yen  
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In the Seventh Lunar Month, many Chinese will offer sacrifices and burn joss paper to seek peace. Buddhists consider this period as an auspicious month and a month for thanksgiving, filial piety and joy.

We should celebrate by offering prayers for world peace, fast and observe a vegetarian diet to protect life and our environment. There will be peace and bliss if we purify our body and soul and transcend earthly superstitions.

Buddhists consider the Seventh Lunar Month as an auspicious month and a month for offering thanks. However, Chinese tradition dictates that this is a month we have to appease the dead and the hungry ghosts by burning joss paper and offering sacrifices.

This belief probably stems from the agrarian nature of the olden days. With poverty being the norm in an agrarian economy, meals were simple except during festivals. The deliverance, or offerings, was an opportunity for the people to have a sumptuous meal. In our modern society, there is no need to preserve such a superstitious practice, as offering sacrifices involves killing, which will accumulate bad karma, while burning joss paper causes environmental pollution. Both are undesirable consequences.

### **Summer Retreat/Rain retreat**

During Buddha's time, the summer season in India was also a rainy season, with poisonous insects infesting the surroundings. It was therefore not safe for the Sangha members to beg for alms in the open. So, during the three-month period from 15th day of the Fourth Lunar Month to 15th day of the Seventh Lunar Month, which is known as the Summer Retreat/Rain Retreat, Sangha members would stay indoors to meditate. During this time, the followers would offer meals to the Sangha members. The three-month retreat allowed the disciples to attain great progress in their Dharma practice; and upon completion, Buddha was joyful while the common followers felt happy and blessed. Hence, the 15th day of the Seventh Lunar Month is known as Buddha's Happy Day.

Another story about the Seventh Lunar Month concerns Maudgalyayana, one of the ten great disciples of the Buddha. He intended to deliver his mother and others from hell. So, upon completion of the Summer Retreat, on the 15th day of the Seventh Lunar Month, he made offerings to the sagely Sangha, thereby collecting merits to achieve the great deliverance. This is what is known today as Ullambana or Deliverance from Suffering among the common people. It also serves to remind us about gratitude and filial piety towards our parents, thus it is also known as Day of Filial Piety.

Having understood the significance behind the Deliverance of the Suffering, it is good that we purify our minds, do away with ignorant superstitions and strive for conservation. We should also offer sincere prayers for peace and stability so that we have a safe, peaceful and happy world to live in.

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### The origin of the joss paper

In the olden days, the common people used hemp stalks as toilet paper while the rich used very rough paper. The rough paper resembles the present day's joss paper that is used as offering in the Seventh Lunar Month. But, it is clear that merits come from the sincerity of the heart and not the actual offering itself. Therefore, the burning of joss paper is a waste, a potential fire risk, and a source of environmental pollution.

Once, a man from Jiayi came to Hualien to see me. He told me, "Master, every year, I use to burn more than ten thousand dollars worth of joss papers." I asked, "Why would you do that?" He answered, "I fall ill often, and the mediums told me that I must burn joss paper to regain health."

Just a few days prior to his visit, he had burnt a full truck-load of joss paper, costing him NT\$80,000. "Did you regain your health after that?" I asked him. "No, and I almost burnt myself due to the heat, and felt exhausted for the next three days. I did not feel any better. This is why my friend brought me here to seek your advice!"

Then I told him a story about burning joss paper as offering:

Once there was a couple who lived by selling paper. Business was not good, and there was a lot of stock. The wife thought of a scheme to sell the paper. Her husband pretended to die, and she cried loudly to attract the attention of her neighbours.

As people crowded into her house, she performed a ritual. She placed an iron bucket and started to burn bundles of paper in it as paper money for her 'deceased' husband to take along on his journey to the next world.

It was arranged that he would sit up in the coffin, and announce loudly: As my wife has burnt so much joss paper for me, I now have a light leading me back to the house. And the wife would exclaim in delight, "Hear what he said! Burning joss paper is like lighting up his path, and he has come back again." Naturally, the piled up stock was sold out in no time. The legend then spread and lived on to become a tradition and ritual until today.

Having understood the background of the tradition, we should think twice about continuing such practices. Is it worthwhile to waste money and resources that are not only potential fire hazards but also affect health and pollute the environment?

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