

THE TRADITIONAL OFFERINGS OF THE ALTAR

Perhaps you've wondered about what to have on your Buddhist altar besides your butsudan itself. Nichiren Daishonin makes little reference to such offerings, so the traditions surrounding our altars have evolved over time:

"Whether you chant the Buddha's name or merely offer flowers and incense, all your virtuous acts will implant benefits and good fortune in your life. With this conviction, you should put your faith into practice."
On Attaining Buddhahood (WND 4).

President Ikeda clarifies that there is flexibility in relation to what we have on our altar:

We should remember ... that such things as prayer beads, Buddhist altars, incense and the like, form part of the ritual aspect of faith. Such formalities are subject to change depending on the era or place, and in most cases change is acceptable.

The substance of our faith is what matters most."
(Discussions on Youth Volume 2 p210-211)

The altar is the focal point of our Buddhist practice. We can think of it as the place where we would invite Nichiren Daishonin to chant if he came to our house. If we dust and clean our altar every day it is a cause for cleaning our life. Nichiren Daishonin wrote to Abutsubo:

"You may think you offered gifts to the Treasure Tower of the Thus Come One Many Treasures but this is not so. You offered them to yourself. You yourself are the Thus Come One who was originally enlightened and endowed with the three bodies. You should chant Nam Myoho Renge Kyo with this conviction. Then the place where you chant daimoku will become the dwelling place of the Treasure Tower."
(WND 299 --300)

Everything we do to show our respect for the Gohonzon such as cleaning the altar, and offering water, greens and incense, expresses our sincerity. Our making offerings towards the Gohonzon expresses our sincere desire to manifest the universal law in our lives. The daily effort we make towards the Gohonzon has a positive effect in our life.

Each of the traditional offerings expresses an aspect of the unlimited potential of our lives. They also represent our five senses: bell – hearing, candle – sight, beads – touch, food – taste, incense – smell.

The use of traditional vessels for offerings is optional and it is fine to use anything that reflects our own taste and individuality.

The Traditional Three Basic Offerings

The traditional three basic offerings are the light of a candle, incense and evergreen leaves. This trio represents the three properties of the Buddha (wisdom, compassion and the Buddha's life). The traditional format is one candle and vase of greens, or two candles and two vases of greens if the altar is larger.

Evergreen Leaves

Although we may offer flowers on a special occasion, they wither and die quickly. Evergreen leaves are usually offered because by lasting longer they better symbolise eternal life. A non-flowering evergreen plant is fine too. If offering leaves, we should change the water in the vase every day.

Candles

Before electricity, candles were essential for illuminating the Gohonzon and were also lit for symbolic reasons. We still light a candle while chanting, and battery or electric candles are fine. Candles represent the latent potential of life. Since light makes everything visible candle light expresses the Buddhist property of wisdom as exemplified by expressions like "the light of the law" and "the light of wisdom". When we snuff the candles its good to use a candle snuffer so as not to blow smoke

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towards the Gohonzon. It's a good idea to close the doors of the butsudan before snuffing the candles to avoid the smoke discolouring the Gohonzon.

Incense

Prior to the advent of modern sanitation, purifying the air in front of the Gohonzon was more than a symbolic need. We still burn incense to purify the air in front of the Gohonzon. It is one of the offerings mentioned by the Lotus Sutra and by Nichiren Daishonin. People with allergies or small children may prefer not to burn incense.

Incense represents the truth of the Middle Way and the potential of our innate Buddha nature. Traditionally, one to three sticks of incense are burned flat to create a feeling of serenity before the Gohonzon. The incense burner is traditionally placed in the middle of the altar in front of the water cup. Traditionally the incense is burned from left to right although that custom may have arisen from the majority of people being right-handed. Although stick incense is usually used, powdered incense is burned on charcoal during funeral and memorial services. If you use smoky incense, try to position the burner so smoke does not drift into the butsudan and discolour the Gohonzon.

You can throw away the ashes once your incense burner gets full. A nice gesture is to give some of your ashes to a new member since stick incense won't burn on a hard surface. But sometimes the container just gets full and you have to empty it.

Additional Offerings

The water cup

Offering a cup of cool water to the Gohonzon is a custom that probably predates Buddhism. Water is highly regarded in the hot country of India and cool water is offered to a guest. In Sanskrit the word for water also means "benefit" or "water of benefit". Fresh water is offered every morning to the Gohonzon in a cup with a lid to keep the water clean. We traditionally remove the lid when chanting in the morning and replace it afterwards, then remove it at the end of the day before evening gongyo. The water can be disposed of as you please, but it is a nice tradition to use it to water plants, to place in the pet water bowl, in the electric jug or drink it (but not from the offering cup!).

Food

There is no fixed rule about what can be offered since what is important is our sincerity in making the offering. The Lotus Sutra tells us about the boy who offered a mud pie to the Buddha and was reborn as King Ashoka. Fruit is a traditional offering because it can be left on the altar for several days. Avoid any food which spoils easily or attracts insects. Food from a special meal may be offered to the Gohonzon before the meal and removed after. Traditionally, when offering food to the Gohonzon, place it on the altar, ring the bell and chant three times.

The Bell

Ring the bell offers a pleasing sound to the Gohonzon and also is useful as a signal when chanting with a group. There was a traditional pattern of bell-ringing for gongyo but now the sutra book instructs us only to "sound the bell".

The bell can be any sort: even tapping a glass with a spoon is a good substitute. It is not necessary to have a bell of the traditional bowl shape. If using a bowl-shaped bell, it should be struck just below the top rim of the bell (rather than at the widest part) so it resonates properly and the signal is more effectively conveyed to the group. It is not necessary to wave the beater in the air as the sound of the bell itself is the signal.

Beads

Although beads are not a part of the altar offerings, they are part of the ritual we use when chanting and are another item from India that predate Buddhism. The string has 108 beads to represent the number of earthly desires of common mortals, are tied in a way to represent the human body, and the pieces are joined with a traditional knot.

The beads are not essential to Buddhist practice but are intended as an aid to our practice. We should treat them respectfully and take care of them, along with our gongyo book. They are never

worn or swung around. However, when beads wear out and break, you can throw them away. If you are especially fond of your beads, some jewellers can rethread them.

We traditionally use the beads by looping the ends over our middle fingers (three tassels on the right hand, two tassels on the left hand) with the string crossed once between the hands. We chant with our palms together in front of our chest: a gesture that has profound meaning:

Gasshō (合掌), or “pressing the palms together” is another name for the Lotus Sutra. Kōbutsu (向仏), or “turning to face the Buddha,” means that one encounters and pays respect to the Lotus Sutra. Pressing the palms together is an element of the body. Turning to face the Buddha is an element of the mind. The passage describes how one dances with joy when one comes to the realization that the elements of the body and the mind are the Wonderful Law. (The Record of the Orally Transmitted Teachings p45 (this page includes further meanings and explanations of pressing the palms together))

Also, as President Ikeda says:

“our joined palms represent the fusion of reality and wisdom – the fusion of our lives with the Mystic Law – while the meeting of the five fingers of both hands represent the mutual possession of the ten worlds. The mutual possession of the ten worlds means that none of the ten worlds – that is, Hell, Hunger, Animality, Anger, Humanity, Rapture, Learning, Realisation, Bodhisattva and Buddhahood – are separate from one another. This is precisely why the power of the world of Buddhahood is manifested in the other nine worlds of our daily lives.”
(Discussions on Youth Volume 2 p210-211)

Other items

Sometimes people add personal items such as memorabilia, a gosho quote or a list of determinations to the altar. These are fine as long as the altar does not become overly crowded or you are distracted from chanting. If you are chanting for someone you can put their photo on the altar as a reminder. During meetings at your house you might consider removing extra items from your altar so they don't distract others from focussing on the Gohonzon.

Everything on the altar should have a purpose and encourage us to chant to the Gohonzon.

The butsudan

Although not strictly an offering, the butsudan (*Jap.* Buddha's House) is truly the one essential item on the altar because it protects the Gohonzon. Although traditionally of wood the butsudan can be made from any material which is sufficiently strong to shelter and protect the Gohonzon. Many people have started their Buddhist practice with the Gohonzon enshrined in a nice cardboard box with a lid that can be taken off and replaced, and graduated to a wooden butsudan when their finances have improved. Our sincerest appreciation is what counts, rather than the grandness of our altar.

Traditionally, the butsudan is the only item on the wall and we don't hang things on the wall above or around it (artwork, photos, clocks etc). After all, nothing compares to the Gohonzon!

The small lotus flower symbols inside the butsudan are optional, and traditionally serve to hold the wooden batten at the bottom of the Gohonzon steady.

When our head is close to the Gohonzon (cleaning inside the butsudan, or opening the doors) we can place a piece of leaf or paper in our mouth as a reminder not to breathe or cough on the Gohonzon.

The traditions of the altar are a way of dignifying our daily practice and are not rules to govern us. The traditions we observe now are the result of traditions which have evolved over the last 700 years and continue to evolve. The sincerity of our practice is more important than the details of our altar and offerings. Like most things in this practice, how we behave towards the Gohonzon is a matter of balance and respect and whether we outwardly observe the traditions or not, respect is something that starts in our own heart.