

Questions and Answers on Faith: Meaning of the Offerings

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Q: Why do we offer water, evergreens, candles and incense to the Gohonzon or hit a bell during gongyo?

A: One way the human spirit expresses itself is by the way we interact with our surroundings. As teenagers, we often declare our identity through our clothes, and express an affinity for our peers by the way we walk and talk. Over the years, each of us tends to develop a distinctive style that reflects our personal values and sense of being.

This sense of ourselves is reflected even in our smallest actions, such as the gentle way a parent pulls a child closer on a windy day or how someone puts aside personal needs to help a colleague. While this behavior might seem insignificant, these actions define who we are.

The offerings associated with the Buddhist altar likewise express our sincerity and commitment to developing the infinite potential within us. Nichiren Daishonin writes: “Whether you chant the Buddha’s name, recite the sutra or merely offer flowers and incense, all your virtuous acts will implant benefits and good fortune in your life” (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 1, p. 4).

However, it is also important to understand that offerings such as incense or evergreen are formalities based on tradition, not doctrine. As Nichiren Daishonin states in many writings, ultimately, our faith in the Gohonzon — or our sincerity and determination in the practice of faith — is what really counts. This kind of sincere faith is expressed through our behavior, including the act of making offerings. Maintaining traditional offerings to the Gohonzon is an eloquent statement of our desire to manifest the universal Law within our daily lives.

This is because when we care for the altar and make offerings to the Gohonzon, we are praising the life of Nichiren Daishonin and the Gohonzon. Since this same Buddha nature exists within us, we are also acknowledging the unlimited potential and source of boundless joy within our lives.

Each of the traditional offerings expresses a different aspect of this joy. For example, India, the birthplace of Buddhism, is a hot, dry country with limited water. It took considerable effort to draw water from a stream or river and carry it back home, where it was appreciated as necessary to sustain life. It was therefore traditionally offered to important guests as a sign of respect. In our practice of Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism, a cup of water is offered to the Gohonzon from this point of view, showing our regard for the life of the true Buddha.

Evergreen, incense and candles also have traditionally been used as regular offerings to the Gohonzon. Evergreen, which remains fresh and vibrant throughout winter, indicates the pure and enduring life of the eternal Law and the supreme life of Buddhahood. Incense is burned to dignify and purify the immediate area around the Gohonzon with a pleasant fragrance. Candles were commonly offered to light the Gohonzon area, while the bell creates an offering of beautiful sound.

The time and effort to maintain this environment are our offerings to the Gohonzon. They are expressions of respect and appreciation. Since we offer them out of our seeking mind toward the Gohonzon and Nichiren Daishonin, the offerings also reflect our Buddha nature.

In an essay describing a story from the Buddhist scripture called “The Poor Woman’s

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Lamp,” President Ikeda writes: “It is not the material worth of an offering but the spirit behind it that counts.... A mind which attaches importance even to the slightest matters and which loves and treasures even seemingly insignificant things can profoundly move people even through a small action” (*Treasures of the Heart*, p. 5).

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