

What About...? Bell, Book, Candle and Saxophone

When Nichiren Daishonin first established the chanting of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, he prescribed very few — if any — formalities in association with Buddhist practice. There were almost no “shoulds” or “should nots.” In fact, it could be said that the Daishonin rescued Buddhism from the superfluous formalities, superstitions and social customs that had become incorporated into Buddhist practice as Buddhism spread through India, China, Korea and Japan. The Daishonin was a reformer, determined to propagate the clear, pure message of the Lotus Sutra.

But over the centuries — as the Daishonin’s Buddhism was barely maintained by Nichiren Shoshu — many formalities crept in. In spreading this Buddhism from Japan to the rest of the world, SGI members simply followed formalities in the tradition of Nichiren Shoshu. Now it’s sometimes hard to tell the difference between what’s really Buddhist practice and what are mere customs having little or nothing to do with Buddhism.

For example, some SGI-USA members feel that they must put candles on their altars and only white candles at that. The purpose, however, of putting candles on one’s altar is symbolic: to offer light to the Gohonzon. In an age in which electric lights serve that purpose, candles are not a practical necessity. Some people feel that candles are aesthetically pleasing on the altar, but it’s a matter of individual choice. If you don’t like candles or think that they’re messy or pose a fire hazard, there’s no Buddhist rule that says you have to have them. Likewise, if you want candles (or just one candle), you can choose whatever color or fragrance you like, not just white and unscented.

In another example, some members feel that it’s wrong to put a sutra book on the floor. This belief probably has its origins in Japanese culture, where respect for books means protecting them from dust, from dirt and, therefore, from the ground. In Japan, it’s customary not to put precious things directly on the floor. Many Americans, though, have no qualms about putting books wherever they think it’s convenient. With regard to all aspects of your Buddhist practice, it’s not a good idea to be careless or sloppy, but putting your book on the floor is not a big issue.

Some members also wonder about bell etiquette: Do you have to ring the bell a prescribed number of times between the prayers in gongyo? And is a big bell better than a small one?

The reason we ring a bell is to offer beautiful sounds to the Buddha — or Gohonzon, in this case. Some people feel that a bowl-shaped bell makes a perfect tone — but size doesn’t matter. In essence, there’s not a strictly prescribed number of rings or dings between prayers; it’s up to your discretion.

Suppose, though, that bell-ringing annoys you or evokes an odd Pavlovian response — is it OK *not* to ring it? Or to substitute some other tone? The point is to offer pleasant sounds to the Gohonzon, so if a sound is unpleasant to you, then why offer it? It’s OK not to, and in theory it’s OK to substitute chimes, a gong or even a saxophone if you’re so inclined. (But heavy brass or woodwind instruments may prove too cumbersome in the long run...better to stick with a bell.)

Overall, the most important thing is the sincerity of your offerings and Buddhist practice.

— LISA JONES, Staff Writer