

WORLD TRIBUNE MAILBOX

A Story

In response to the new Buddhist Basic series, I'd like to offer you a story called "The Evil Giant and the Tiny Wren."

An evil giant once terrorized a distant land. He stole the peasants' livestock and ate their crops. His mighty arms destroyed whole villages. His careless footsteps wrecked woodlands. Even the king's best soldiers could not stop him. No one knew what to do.

Then a tiny bird made a great determination. She was just a common wren, but brave and wise. Every night she left her warm, safe nest and flew to the valley where the giant slept. There she sang until dawn, keeping him awake. Her dull color and smallness kept the giant from ever discovering the source of his insomnia.

Finally, after many weeks of singing, the giant, teary-eyed and exhausted, left the kingdom. He never returned.

The evil giant represents devilish functions and negative karma. The tiny wren represents ordinary people. And singing every night represents consistent Buddhist practice, chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo.

— DON HANSBROUGH, Seattle

Questions About Formalities

I have some questions regarding "Bell, Book, Candle and Saxophone" in the Nov. 13 issue. First I'd like to thank you for writing such a great article. I have had several questions regarding the formality of keeping an altar and your article certainly offered clarification on some issues.

The main question I have is how to avoid creating a negative cause by not following formalities. Is there a "line" that can be crossed? How do we know what is timeless and what is a fad? To quote a friend of mine, "If yoga is the latest thing, should we all do gongyo while standing on our heads?" I have four specific questions that I would like advice on.

The first is regarding whether it is OK to cross your legs in front of the Gohonzon. Often, when I am sitting, I like to cross my legs. I have been told by my fellow members that one should keep both feet on the floor when you chant. Is this true?

The second question is regarding keeping pictures on my altar. I was told that you should not keep pictures of loved ones on or around your altar. It was explained to me that pictures will offer a distraction. I am seeking guidance on this issue because I really disagree with this point of view. I feel that one reason I am even chanting at all is because of the people in the pictures. I feel that instead of offering a distraction, they help me focus on my human revolution. I don't keep the photographs where they would obstruct my view of the Gohonzon. I have followed guidance to remove these pictures, but it is an issue that concerns me.

Third, I have been told that it is inappropriate to have anything in the room higher than the Gohonzon. I have followed guidance on this issue by remodeling my altar, but now it looks awkward. (Not to mention it is really hard to decorate due to this issue.)

Finally, what about having plants around your altar? Do they have to be green? Are fresh cut flowers OK?

I would truly appreciate any advice you can give me on these issues.

— SUSAN MASOTTI, Salt Lake City

Title: Mailbox: 11/27/98

Subject: World Tribune 11/27/98 n.3218 p.11 WT981127p11

Author:

Keywords: 11/27/98 December July Mailbox Opinion Tribune World

Editor's Note: Crossing your legs while chanting is not a big issue. In general, when we chant we should be alert and focused on the Gohonzon, and our posture should reflect this.

The objects that we place on our altars are offerings to the Gohonzon. To put a watch or clock on your altar, for example, isn't an offering — it's more of a convenience or a distraction. (After all, the Gohonzon is timeless!) It's a matter of personal choice whether to put photos on your altar — as long as it's clear that the Gohonzon is the object of devotion and that you're chanting to it, not to the photos. The altar should be uncluttered.

In some Asian cultures, placing something higher than everything else in the room is a way of expressing respect. But in other cultures (and if no disrespect is intended), having lamps or paintings higher than the Gohonzon in a room does not imply disrespect.

In future issues, we hope to examine more formalities, such as your plants/flowers question. Overall, adhering to Buddhist formalities in itself is not the purpose of Buddhist practice — the purpose is simply to change our lives for the better. Formalities should be understood in this context.

Love the Changes

Love your new changes. The thicker paper makes it easier when using a highlighter and it's so much easier to read with the background white. Thanks for constantly trying to make it better!

— ANN DIAMOND, Rochester, N.Y.