

HOW TO VIEW BUDDHIST FORMALITIES
BY TED MORINO
SGI-USA STUDY DEPARTMENT SENIOR ADVISOR

In practicing Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism, it is important to put into perspective the issue of formality.

Essentially, Buddhism is the teaching that enables us to access our innate Buddhahood. And the purpose of Buddhist practice is to establish Buddhahood as our basic life-condition. The principle that makes this possible is known in Buddhism as the Law. Buddhist formalities are a means to support this objective of bringing forth our Buddhahood and to express our appreciation for having discovered the way to achieve it.

While the Law is not a human creation, formalities are. We might say that the Law was discovered, while formalities were created throughout Buddhist history.

Fundamental to our employment of Buddhist formalities is our heart — our spirit of appreciation and gratitude for the teacher of the Law (Buddha) who awakens us to its beneficial power. "What matters is one's heart" (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 5, p. 289) and "Faith alone is what really matters" (MW-1, 246) can be guidelines in our discussion of formalities in Buddhism.

Throughout Buddhist history, people's grateful hearts and minds have been expressed in their behavior of making offerings to the Buddha or to Buddhism. In keeping with this, here are some key points to remember in making traditional offerings to the Gohonzon.

WATER

Offering a cup of fresh water to the Gohonzon derives from the ancient Indian appreciation of the value of water — India's hot climate made the refreshing and purifying qualities of water particularly precious and cherished. As a token of our sincerity in faith, we offer to the Gohonzon a cup of fresh, cool water each morning, and over the years, the custom of removing and discarding the water in the evening, usually before evening gongyo, developed.

EVERGREEN

An evergreen called *shikimi* has traditionally been used as an offering to the Gohonzon in Japan. Native to India, it was brought to Japan by Chin Chien-chan (688–763), a priest of the China's T'ang dynasty and founder of Japan's Ritsu (Precepts) school of Buddhism. *Shikimi* has long been regarded as Japan's most fragrant tree, and is used as an offering before Buddhist images. Tradition has it that this was because its shape resembled that of a blue lotus flower. Historically, *shikimi* was regarded as signifying vibrant life force and eternal purity. This description, however, is not mentioned anywhere in Nichiren Daishonin's writings, and the formality of using *shikimi* as an offering to the Gohonzon appears to have been established long after Nichiren Dai-shonin's passing.

As *shikimi* is not readily available in the United States, other types of greens — including artificial ones — have been used by SGI-USA members. The offering of evergreen to the Gohonzon has been done in the spirit of the following words of the Daishonin:

“Whether you chant the Buddha’s name, recite the sutra or merely offer flowers and incense, all your virtuous acts will implant benefits in your life. With this conviction you should put your faith into practice” (MW-1, 4), and the Lotus Sutra passage, “At once the Brahma kings...took the heavenly flowers and scattered them over the Buddha” (*The Lotus Sutra*, p. 123). The Lotus Sutra also speaks of erecting monuments of fragrant sandalwood and other plants to the Buddha after his passing.

SGI President Ikeda writes, “There is a concept in Buddhism known as *zuiho bini* — meaning that so long as one does not deviate from the essential teachings of the Daishonin’s Buddhism, that is, faith in the Gohonzon, it is fine to make the formalities of Buddhism conform with the manners and customs of each area and with the convention of the times” (*The New Human Revolution*, vol. 1, p. 33). In any case, it is important to maintain the conviction that our sincere offerings to the Gohonzon and to Buddhism constitute “virtuous acts” that “will implant benefits and good fortune” in our lives. In this sense, even simple formalities such as the offering of evergreens, so long as they are grounded in sincerity, are one way in which we “put our faith into practice.”

President Ikeda further says: “In case no *shikimi* is available, you can offer other kinds of evergreen. Even artificial greens will do so long you offer them in sincerity.”

While many Buddhist schools make offerings of flowers, the tradition of the SGI, adopted from the tradition of Nichiren Shoshu, has been not to do so. This arose from the symbolism of the evergreen, which suggests permanence and vitality — the eternal aspect of life that we strive to develop through Buddhist practice. Flowers, on the other hand, in withering quickly, imply life’s transient and fleeting nature. Nevertheless, there is no reference to the rejection of flowers as an offering in the Daishonin’s writings, and it can be assumed to be a custom that developed in later times. There is no doctrinal reason, therefore, to prohibit the offering of flowers.

CANDLES

Buddhist scriptures liken the offering of light to wisdom dispelling the darkness of ignorance. Candles are an offering of light. In Nichiren Daishonin’s time, however, candles did not exist in Japan — the main source of light was the oil lantern. In fact, we find phrases in the Goshō such as “adding oil to a lantern” (*Goshō Zenshu*, p. 978) or “A lamp brightens with oil added to it” (*Goshō Zenshu*, p. 1562).

The significance of offerings of light is illustrated by such devoted acts as a poor woman’s offering of lamp oil to the Buddha [“A poor woman cut off her hair and sold it to buy oil (for the Buddha), and not even the winds sweeping down from Mount Sumeru could extinguish the flame of the lamp fed by this oil” (MW-7, 259)] or Bodhisattva Medicine King’s offering light by burning his elbow (*The Lotus Sutra*, p. 282).

Traditionally, white candles have been used, but there is no doctrine requiring or forbidding the use of any particular color of candle. It remains a matter of personal preference. When choosing candles for meeting places, however, it might be reasonable to consider the preferences of others who might be attending as well. Very brightly colored or gaudy candles could conceivably distract some people from focusing comfortably on the Gohonzon. And where there may a fire hazard, it is advisable not to use candles. Today, many members use electric candles in place of regular candles. Whether we choose natural or electric candles, what matters is that our offerings are not made for formality’s sake

but out of our intent to brighten and thus honor the area before the Buddha (Gohonzon).

INCENSE

Incense represents an offering of fragrance. As a fragrance, incense was cherished in hot and humid climates to dispel odors and to provide a pleasant atmosphere.

As with all offerings, the offering of incense to the Buddha is an expression of gratitude — it is not a requirement. If one is allergic to or dislikes the smell of incense, it is completely acceptable not to offer it. Also, “less smoke” varieties have been available for some time. For those concerned about the potentially negative health effects of inhaling excessive smoke, it is naturally advisable to avoid burning candles or incense in a confined or inadequately ventilated space.

Some Buddhist schools burn incense by standing it upright. Our tradition has been to burn the incense by lying it horizontally. This too is not essentially a doctrinal issue, though some doctrinal explanations were added in later years by the priesthood.

On special commemorative occasions and for memorial services, it is traditional to offer three pinches of powdered incense, though often one pinch is offered (particularly when many people are present to make such an offering). The three pinches of incense is said to signify the three kinds of action by which karma is created — thoughts, words and deeds.

THE BELL

Ringling the bell is the offering of sound. For this reason, it is best to try to create a pleasant sound by striking the bell. One should therefore avoid striking the bell too hard. There is no mention in the Daishonin’s writings of a specific manner or number of times for striking the bell, though such things were traditionally stressed by the priesthood.

President Toda once stated: “Ringling the bell during gongyo is an act of giving comfort to the Buddha. Therefore, the bell should not be rung in an unruly manner.... We also ring the bell as a signal to others when chanting with a group of people.”

CRANES

The rounded crane was adopted by Nichiren Shoshu during the Edo Period (some 300 years ago) as a symbol of that school to be used in official business dealing with the Tokugawa shogunate government. In more recent years, two metallic crane-capped accessories patterned after the sake bottles have been placed in front of the Gohonzon. The significance of this, of course, is the symbolic offering of sake (though today we generally don’t fill these decorative bottles with anything) to the Gohonzon, not the offering of the crane mark. As an expression of their rejection of the error and ill intentions of the current Nichiren Shoshu priesthood, some members have discarded these crane-capped bottles and replaced them with similar bottle-shaped accessories topped with the Soka Gakkai’s eight-petal lotus symbol. In either case, these accessories have no doctrinal meaning, and are simply intended to decorate and dignify the altar. It is not essential that they be used.

Title: How To View Buddhist Formalities

Subject: World Tribune 04/16/99 n.3238 p.2 WT990416p02

Author: Ted Morino

Keywords: Buddhist Encouragement Formalities Guidance Morino Practice Religion View

FOOD AND LIQUOR

In Japan, a cup of cooked rice is often placed briefly before the Gohonzon as an offering during mealtime, and *mochi* cakes — made from a sticky rice paste — are offered on New Year's Day. In the "New Year's Gosho" Nichiren Daishonin mentions the offering of *mochi* cakes. Rice has long been the main staple of Japan and much of Asia, and it is therefore natural that it has developed as a Buddhist offering.

Fresh fruit is also popular as a food offering among members around the world. This may be because whole fruit is not as perishable as other foods.

On New Year's Day and other significant dates, it has also been customary in Japan to offer two large bottles of sake. As the 29th high priest, Nichiu, states in his work "On Formalities," "Since sincerity is expressed through the giving of sake in secular society in this country, sincerity in Buddhism can also be expressed through the offering of sake."

As with all the offerings mentioned thus far, offerings of food or drink are significant when made out of sincerity. They are not absolutely necessary, and when done, the choice of food or drink can be a matter of cultural or personal preference.

As we have seen, various Buddhist formalities concerning offerings have derived from a mix of Indian, Chinese and Japanese cultures. Since they are essentially culturally based, they have evolved, and will continue to evolve, over time and according to local customs.

INSIDE THE ALTAR

So as not to diminish the importance of our concentration on the Gohonzon, the supreme object of devotion, it is advisable that the altar environment always be kept neat and clean. Therefore it is best not to place unnecessary items on or within the altar. However, it is understandable that someone may want to place something close to the heart — such as a picture of a loved one, for example — near the altar to serve as a clear reminder for directing one's prayers.

PRAYER BEADS

Prayer beads are a traditional Buddhist accessory. It is not known what kind of prayer beads Nichiren Daishonin used. While a great deal of meaning later attached to the various components of the prayer beads, they are essentially no more than tools to assist us in our Buddhist practice.

Regarding whether to rub the beads while chanting, again, there is no clear doctrine concerning this. Because Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism should not be restricted by rigid formalities, it would be incorrect to say that we cannot rub our prayer beads. But we should consider that frequent or overly vigorous rubbing of the beads can be a nervous habit that ultimately distracts from our concentrated prayer. The Bodhisattva Universal Worthy (Fugen) Sutra, considered an epilogue to the Lotus Sutra, reads, "Sit upright and ponder the true reality (Gohonzon)." In order to ponder this reality with utmost clarity, and to find the greatest satisfaction in our prayer, it is best to sit calmly without excessive motion while chanting.

Title: How To View Buddhist Formalities

Subject: World Tribune 04/16/99 n.3238 p.2 WT990416p02

Author: Ted Morino

Keywords: Buddhist Encouragement Formalities Guidance Morino Practice Religion View

Since we employ the prayer beads as part of our Buddhist practice, it is preferable to treat them respectfully. If and when they wear out or break, however, it is all right to dispose of them. We can do the same with the old sutras books that we will not use again.

OTHER FORMALITIES

Regarding the other formalities referred to in guidance given in the early days of SGI-USA, we can consider many of them culturally based. In this respect, we can usually apply the principle of *zuiho bini* — the adjustment of non-essential aspects of Buddhist formality or practice to suit a given culture or condition.

Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism was brought to this country by courageous practitioners who immigrated from Japan. This point should be eternally acknowledged. However, it is also important to acknowledge that these pioneers of our organization brought with them some formalities that were natural within the context of their own culture, but need not be strictly applied while practicing Buddhism in America.

It should be noted, however, that to simply disregard or reject formalities outright may be akin to "throwing the baby out with the bath water." When we observe formalities as an expression of a sincere heart, it can lead to positive results in our lives. Formalities can be a means to express our appreciation to the Gohonzon. By simply rejecting formalities out of hand, we may be slighting the sincerity that is associated with them, and this could undermine our spirit of faith and practice as well as our growth. On the other hand, insisting on rigid adherence to formality while leaving no room for spontaneity does little to enhance our Buddhist practice.

In any case, the substance of our Buddhist practice lies always in challenging ourselves to develop our innate Buddhahood, not in religious adherence to ritual and ceremony — particularly those not practiced by the Daishonin, but introduced later on.

And naturally, the elevated state of life we achieve through Buddhist practice should find tangible expression as acts of sincerity and appreciation. In this vein, the quality of our offerings and actual proof can clearly reflect the condition of our faith.

President Ikeda once referred to the relationship between Buddhist teachings and formalities: "The ultimate teaching in Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism means chanting daimoku to the Gohonzon. In other words, propagating Buddhism and studying it is of primary significance in the practice of faith. All other matters belong to the realm of formality, which can change according to the condition of the time. Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism and its correct way of practice can be convincing to any person in modern times. Since Nichiren Daishonin is forever the Buddha of the Latter Day of the Law, he would not propound a teaching that makes no sense to future generations."

The formalities of making offerings to the Gohonzon should therefore be made easily understandable to those living in the country where the Daishonin's Buddhism is being spread.

Reference materials used for this article: January and February 1994 issues of The Daibyakurenge, the Soka Gakkai's study journal.