

Aspects of Ceremonial

Part 2: Offerings

An essential part of ceremonial is the opportunity to cultivate and express gratitude. The practice of gratitude is a hallmark of our Serene Reflection/Soto Zen tradition. Gratitude is more than just a feeling. It's a quality of Buddha nature that we bring forth in training, just as we awaken compassion or practice patience. We do not just express gratitude; rather we learn to be gratitude. Gratitude is a verb, not a noun.

In a ceremony everything we do, all our actions (karma) of body, speech, and mind, can be an offering of gratitude. It is our choice, our attitude of mind, that makes these actions meritorious or not. We can bring a positive and bright mind to all that we do, whether we feel bright or not, and whether we understand completely or not. It is this whole-hearted choice that creates the positive consequences of our actions—merit.

All of ceremonial is an offering because we don't have to be there and do this. No one requires us to come to the temple and participate. Our offering comes of our own free will. Offering is another word for giving—*dana*, charity, generosity of spirit. Offerings are spiritual efforts we bring to a ceremony, just as we bring ourselves into the presence of Buddha when we meditate, offering our body-minds for the cleansing of karma. In a ceremony, we endeavor to give without wanting anything other than to make it the best offering we can. As Great Master Dōgen teaches about charity in the Four Wisdoms section of the *Shushogi*, “We give without expecting any reward whatsoever.” The offertory of both our monastic and lay ordination ceremonies climaxes with, “The offering, the donor and he who receives these...things are completely immaculate, there is nothing to be desired...” (*Liturgy of the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives for the Laity*, 2nd ed., p 20.)

So now let us look at the meanings of specific offerings we make during a ceremony. We'll organize them here according to which sense they appeal—body, eye, ear, nose, tongue, and mind. All offerings are made in spirit to the Buddha, and we want to present gifts that bring joy and pleasure to our great Teacher. In Part 1, we discussed various movements of a ceremony—offerings of our body,

such as bowing and circumambulation—so we won't go over those again in detail here.

Offerings that delight the eye include flowers and lights. Flowers seem to be an almost universal expression of love. As children we spontaneously and naturally present them to parents. We give them to our loved ones and to friends on special occasions such as weddings and funerals. Most, if not all, world religions include flowers as part of their creation and adornment of sacred space. The offering of flowers expresses our gratitude for our teachers and the Dharma. In Buddhism flowers also remind us of impermanence, the transiency of life. What is beautiful today will be gone tomorrow, so it behooves us to train to the best of our ability today while we can. In our particular lineage, we substitute silk or other artificial flowers for cut ones out of respect for the life of plants. If the flowers resulted from pruning or were offered by someone unaware of our custom, we use them nonetheless so that their life does not go to waste.

Lights are another universal offering. There must be something archetypal in our gratitude for light going back to the appearance of light when human beings first evolved. What gratitude they must have felt when the sun rose in the morning and perhaps even more so when they learned to capture or create and retain the light of fire! Symbolically, light represents the Teaching and dispels the darkness of ignorance, death, doubt, and despair. It enables us to discern what is good and skillful to do and what is not.

How did lights find their way into ceremonial? Before the advent of gas and electric lighting, candles and oil lamps provided essential illumination. Placing them on the altar would be natural and instinctive. Such necessities constituted a major temple expense, and thus evolved into offerings that ordinary folk could easily bring to the temple. In addition, lights are not just practical, they are beautiful. Many of us may remember how as children we were fascinated by the flickering light of a flame. Burning lights remind us of the presence of Spirit.

Altars in our tradition are set up in a particular way to show the symbolic meaning of several offerings. Visualize a circle, beginning at your left (as you face the altar) with flowers, rising to the Buddha or Bodhisattva as the central figure or focus (preferably on a dais or plinth), and then returning on the right with the

candle or light. Directly in front of the statue or image is a water-offering cup, which represents both the cleansing activity of meditation and the fountain-like flowing of the Water of the Spirit. We offer the flowers of our karma—the result of seeds we planted—to the Buddha to be cleansed in meditation, the “cosmic washing machine,” as Rev. Master Jiyu often presented it. The result of our efforts is clear light, the Teaching, with which to guide our lives.

Water offerings appeal to our sense of taste and sight. Nothing tastes better than fresh, pure water, and clear water in a lovely glass or goblet inspires us with its reminder of the “immaculacy of emptiness.” As our senses are purified through training, we come to increasingly appreciate simple, pure sensations, such as the taste of water or the sound of a gong.

One may place offerings of fruit on the altar as well. Fruit is the “purest” edible offering (least karma created) in that we don’t need to kill the plant to harvest it. Fruit is sweet, delicious, and easily digestible. It represents the Dharma—that which we digest through meditation and training and which gives us sustenance and energy. Cooked food is also fine for altar offerings, but must be removed before it spoils; dry foods such as nuts and baked goods work well, too. Altar offerings are intended to be consumable, and food, especially fruit, along with incense and other necessities, are always appropriate as gifts to the temple or to monks in general.

All ceremonies include an incense offering. Incense is fragrant, an enjoyable experience for our olfactory sense (nose). Many of our Mahayana scriptures speak of other fragrant offerings, such as unguents and ointments, which in addition delight our sense of touch. We use only incense in ceremonies, but the meaning is comparable. At a ceremony’s beginning, the celebrant or “leading teacher” offers incense on behalf of everyone present. On special occasions, this incense may contain rare ingredients and produce a particularly wonderful fragrance. The stick incense is offered in a beautiful bowl, again at the altar’s center, that represents our human body. We take the stuff of our life (karma) and ignite it with the fire of training, and the result is a pleasant perfume. The natural ability of that merit to permeate the universe (all space) is illustrated in the way the smoke fills every corner of the room. In traditions with a Japanese heritage such as ours, we use light-fragranced incense that stimulates and delights without overpowering our

sense of smell. For memorials and festivals, everyone present has the opportunity to come to the altar and offer granular incense.

Another offering that appeals to our sense of taste occurs during festival ceremonies. Often with the assistance of chaplains and acolytes, the celebrant dramatically proffers a Great Monk's Offertory of tea and cake (or other baked goods) in distinctive porcelain ware on brightly painted lacquered stands. Such festival ceremonies include important events in the life of the Buddha, the honored day of a Bodhisattva, or the memorial for a great master of our lineage. After the ceremony the community often enjoys eating and drinking the cake and tea together and "consuming" the teaching of the day offered by the ceremony and the celebrant.

The chanting or recitation of Scriptures provides delight for both ear and mind. From very early on in the history of Buddhism, teachings were set to verse to aid memorization, and *gathas* (hymns of joy) were composed to honor and praise the Buddha. The meaning of the scriptures provides "food" for the mind. The words carry that meaning and consequently must as "pure" as possible—clear, appropriate, not unpleasant or strange—so that the mind perceives and processes without stumbling. Further articles will explore both music and scriptures in more detail.

Our liturgy's public ceremonies always end with an offertory, or dedication of merit, which underscores the offering and gratitude aspects of ceremonial. In addition to the individual offerings presented above, the ceremony itself is an offering. Listen to how the last lines of offertories usually end with an extension of merit in the broadest way imaginable. The Founder's Ceremony offertory is a good example: "May the offerings we make here show our gratitude and joy to all living things. We pray that the merit shall not only be given to our Founder, but light the way of all who have not yet found the Truth." (*OBC Liturgy for Laity*, page 86). We hang on to nothing for ourselves, all is given selflessly. Such is a consummate practice of generosity and gratitude

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