

Lighting up the Pure Land: Winter Holiday/Festive Season Decorations

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Buddhist winter holiday or festive season decorations represent in visual form what the world and universe looked like when Shakyamuni Buddha realized enlightenment. These decorations also are derived from descriptions of various Pure Lands, presided over by a celestial or transcendental Buddha such as Amitabha (Amida), which are from our tradition's point of view representations of Nirvana or enlightenment. In adapting Buddhism to a western context, Rev. Master Jiyu was innovative and creative in drawing freely from northern European Christian and pre-Christian (primarily Celtic) symbols and customs to make it possible for our celebration of winter holidays to accord with the surrounding culture.

Buddha's enlightenment is traditionally observed in eastern Asia (China, Japan, Korea, Vietnam) on December 8th. Many temples of our Order shift the public celebration of the holiday to the 25th or another December Sunday convenient for the laity. Gifts representing the Dharma and other offerings of love and gratitude are appropriate.

Jewel Trees: Jewel trees represent the Bodhi-tree, the noble Indian fig tree with shimmering heart-shaped leaves under which the Buddha realized enlightenment. Any sort of tree will do—Throssel Hole Buddhist Abbey uses an artificial one resembling the original. Pine trees in the East, and by extension other conifers, are considered to symbolize the Eternal, since they are ever-green, that is, not changing with the seasons.

These trees are described in the Scriptures as “bejeweled, heavy with blossoms and fruit,” strung with garlands and nets of

flowers, jewels, and bells, all of which radiate and reflect light. Most of our traditional Christmas tree ornaments can be seen to have Buddhist meaning:

Jewels: Jewels are precious and beautiful. In ancient times there were seven gems especially valued: gold, silver, lapis lazuli, crystal, agate, ruby or pearl, and carnelian. Jewel-like ornaments can represent the Three Treasures, the Teaching or a portion thereof, or the wish-fulfilling jewel (often a pearl), the Buddha Nature within each of us which can satisfy the Heart's deepest longing.

Flowers: Flowers seem to be a favorite, almost universal, offering, pleasing to see in beauty, form, texture, color, and scent. A full blossom often represents enlightenment. Various flowers have specific meanings in Buddhism, such as the lotus (representing the path of training) and the plum blossom (symbolizing the Zen transmission).

Fruit: Fruit, being the product of the flower, can represent the results of training and the deeds of merit we practice on the Bodhisattva path, such as charity, benevolence, tenderness, and sympathy. They are nourishing and sweet. The Healing Buddha Bhaisajyaguru often holds a bowl of herbs or a medicinal piece of fruit representing the curative power of meditation and the Dharma.

Lights: All of the above, as well the Buddha Himself and everything around Him, emanated and reflected light, the true nature of the universe. Also, it is said that the moment of Shakyamuni's enlightenment occurred when He saw the morning star rising in the eastern sky.

Bells and Drums: Jewel trees are sometimes described hung with bells that tinkle musically in the air. Devas (heavenly beings) and celestial musicians beat drums and make beautiful sounds. Sometimes the trees themselves mysteriously produce music. All of these can represent the sound or voice of the Dharma.

Garlands and Nets: Fragrant garlands of flowers and nets of gems, together with tassels and banners, often drape the trees.

Other traditional ornaments: With a bit of imagination, other traditional ornaments may be “converted” for use on a Buddhist jewel tree: angels become devas and celestial musicians; birds approximate dragons and garudas, or become another source for the beautiful music; snowflakes remind us of impermanence.

Other Buddhist symbols: There are also many other Buddhist symbols which lend themselves to being fashioned into ornaments: the Wheel of the Dharma (Dharmachakra), a conch shell (representing the Voice of the Eternal), the knot of Eternity (representing the everlasting love of the Eternal), and other of the “eight auspicious symbols” used to venerate the Buddha. Stupas of various sorts and designs can represent different traditions and cultures. Animals with specific symbolism such as lions, elephants, and dragons may be used, as well as other animals from the Jataka tales with significance for you and your training (colorful origami is one possibility). Ornaments in which one places a photograph work well for favorite Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, Arahants, or members of your family or loved ones. Chinese Buddhist pendants and tassels comprised of miniature scriptures or paintings have been popular on our temple’s tree. Use what works best for you and your family and friends

Two Scriptural references for “jewel trees” and adornments: From the opening of *The Flower Ornament Scripture (The Avatamsaka Sutra)*, one of the traditional Scriptures of the Serene Reflection Meditation (Soto Zen) tradition,

The tree of enlightenment was tall and outstanding. Its trunk was diamond, its main boughs were lapis lazuli, its branches and twigs were of various precious elements. The leaves, spreading in all directions, provided shade, like clouds. The precious blossoms were of various colors, the branching twigs spread out their shadows. Also the fruits

were jewels containing a blazing radiance. They were together with the flowers in great arrays. The entire circumference of the tree emanated light; within the light there rained precious stones, and within each gem were enlightening beings [Bodhisattvas], in great hosts like clouds, simultaneously appearing...The tree of enlightenment constantly gave forth sublime sounds speaking various truths without end. (Cleary translation, Vol. 1, p. 55)



*Garuda birds on a jewel tree:
Eugene Buddhist Priory*

From *The Scripture on the Immeasurable Life of the Tathagata*, a chapter of *The Lotus Sutra*:

Tranquil will this realm of Mine be, ever filled with devas and humans in parks and groves, amongst towers and palaces bedecked with gems of every kind. Under bejeweled trees, heavy with blossoms and fruit, may these beings take their delight and play, whilst devas beat their heavenly drums, ever making pleasing music, and showering down coral tree flowers upon the Buddha and His great assembly. (Buddhist

Writings for Meditation and Daily Practice, p. 36).

Other sources

Eight auspicious symbols: fish, parasol, conch shell, lotus blossom, victory banner, vase of sacred water, Dharma Wheel, knot of eternity (from *Shambhala Dictionary of Buddhism and Zen*, p. 62).

“Precious seven” substances or jewels: *Threefold Lotus Sutra* (Kato/Underhill trans.), Glossary, p. 379.