

Some Buddhist Rituals and Festivals

Buddhism in practice is more colorful than just learning about the Buddha's life and His teachings. It includes many observances, some of which are common to all Buddhists while others characteristic of a particular culture or country.

As we are beings of both reason and emotion, devotional rituals are important in helping us connect to the Buddha and His teachings. Rituals can bring meaningful solemnity into practice, helping us to focus and attain calmness. they should be done out of sincere faith, not fear, greed or superstition.

The Shrine

The shrine found in Buddhist homes or temples is a focal point of Buddhist observances dedicated to the Triple Gem. The Buddha image in the center of the shrine represents and reminds us of the Buddha and the ideal of Enlightenment, and its perfect qualities of Wisdom and Compassion among many others. It helps to inspire us as we recall the greatness of the Buddha and His teaching.

The shrine may also include other objects such as a volume of Buddhist scriptures to represent the Dharma. Some shrines may include pictures or photographs of Buddhist monks and nuns to represent the Sangha.

When a Buddhist stands before a shrine, the objects he sees on it help him to recall the qualities that are found in the Triple Gem. This inspires him to work towards cultivating these qualities in himself.

Bowing

Prostration before an image of the Buddha is not idol worshiping. It is an expression of deep veneration. It acknowledges that the Buddha has attained perfect and supreme Enlightenment. Such an act helps one to overcome egoistic feelings - to become more ready to learn from the Buddha.

Placing Palms Together

Placing one's palms together at chest level is a traditional gesture to express deep reverence to the Triple Gem. When Buddhists greet one another, they hold their palms together like a budding Lotus flower, bow slightly, and say, silently, "A Lotus (the symbol of purity in Buddhism) for you, a Buddha to be." This greeting acknowledges the seeds of awakening or Buddhahood within the other person as we wish him well-being and happiness. Placing the palms together also has a focusing and calming effect on the Mind.

Circumambulation

Circumambulation is the act of going round an object of veneration, such as a stupa (a structure which houses holy relics of the Buddha or renowned Sangha masters), a Bodhi tree (the tree the Buddha sat under for shelter when He attained Enlightenment) or a Buddha image for three or more times as a gesture of respect. It is done by walking meditatively in a clockwise direction, keeping one's right towards the object of veneration. [Within the Bonpo Tradition in Tibet, one walks counter-clockwise round the object.]

Offerings

Making shrine offerings is an act of devotion which expresses appreciation and veneration to the Triple gem. Each item of offering has its significance.

Light

The offering of light reminds us of the illuminating brightness of Wisdom which dispels the darkness of Ignorance on the path towards Enlightenment. This urges us to seek the light of ultimate Wisdom.

[Within the Monijiao Tradition Light also signifies the Divine Source and all Buddhas emanating from that Source.]

Reverencing the Buddha, we offering candles and lamps:

To Him, who is the light, we offer light.

From His great lamp, a lamp we light within us:

The lamp of Bodhi (awakening) shining within our hearts.

Flowers

The offering of fresh and beautiful flowers which soon becomes withered, scentless and discolored serves as a reminder of the impermanence of all things, including our very lives. This urges us to treasure every moment of our life while not becoming attached to it.

Reverencing the Buddha, we offer flowers:

Flowers that today are fresh and sweetly blooming,

Flowers that tomorrow are faded and fallen.

Our bodies too, like flowers, will pass away.

Incense

The offering of fragrant incense which fills the air symbolizes the virtue and purifying effect of wholesome conduct. This urges us to cease all evil and to cultivate all of the good.

Reverencing the Buddha, we offer incense:

Incense whose fragrance pervades the air.

The fragrance of the perfect life, sweeter than incense,

Spreads in all directions throughout the world.

Water

The offering of water symbolizes Purity, Clarity and Calmness. This urges us to cultivate our body, speech and Mind to attain these qualities.

Fruits

Fruits symbolize the fruits of spiritual attainment that lead towards the ultimate fruit of Enlightenment, which is the goal of all Buddhists. This urges us to strive towards Enlightenment for one and all.

Chanting

Chanting (Puja) is a melodious way of reading as one reflects upon the Buddha's teachings. Besides aiding memorization, chanting in a soothing tune has a calming effect on both the reciter and the hearer.

Chanting should be done solemnly with mindfulness and energy. Like meditation, chanting helps one to concentrate and develop a peaceful state of Mind.

Words of the Buddha may also be recited in mindfulness of the Triple Gem in times of fear or disturbance, whether arising from external disturbances or from oneself, so that such disturbances can be overcome. This is possible as the Triple Gem is free from all kinds of defilements and

hindrances such as Craving, Aversion and Ignorance.

Chanting can be done in any languages. Popular languages include Pali, Sanskrit (languages used in the Buddha's time), Chinese, Tibetan, Thai, English, etc.

Lay Buddhists often chant once in the morning and once in the evening. The purpose of Morning Puja is to remind oneself to be mindful of the chanted teachings throughout the day.

The purpose of Morning Puja is to remind oneself to be mindful of the chanted teachings throughout the day. The purpose of the Evening Puja is to reflect whether one had upheld during the day what one had resolved to in the morning.

Though the choice of what is chanted varies from tradition to tradition, some of the general contents include: Going for Refuge, the Five Precepts, Praise to the Triple Gem, Sutras, Mantras, Homage to Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, Confession of Faults, Rejoicing in Merit and Sharing of Merit.

Mantras

Mantras are short sacred phrases of syllables that symbolize certain teachings or qualities (eg. the six-syllable mantra "Om Mani Padme Hum," which symbolizes Compassion), representing Truth in its various aspects maybe recited.

Chanting mantras helps to bring the Mind to Peace and Calmness while purifying it. Each specific mantra can help

to bring about certain positive characteristics in the Mind such as Compassion, Wisdom, Courage...

Homage to Buddhas and Bodhisattvas

Homage to the names of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas (eg. "Namo Amitufo" or Homage to Amitabha Buddha, and "Namo Daci Dabei Guanshiyin Pusa" or Homage to Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva of Great Compassion) can be chanted single-mindedly to recall and invoke in oneself the virtues and qualities they personify. Doing so helps to remind us that we too can attain to perfection in various qualities like them.

Upvasatha Days

On Upavasatha or new and full moon days (the first and fifteenth days of the lunar month), many Buddhists assemble in temples to meditate, make offerings, recite sermons and perform acts of veneration to the Triple Gem. Many also take vegetarian meals on these days as they observe the Eight Precepts.

Light Transference Ceremony

In this ceremony, devotees hold a lit candle after sunset, as they pave around the perimeter of a temple, holy object or monument in walking meditation as they chant mantras or the Buddha's name in praise to Him.

The ceremony represents the passing of the Light of Wisdom (sharing of the Truth) to every direction of the world to dispel the darkness of Ignorance. On a personal level, it has the significance of lighting up one's inner lamp of Wisdom.

The indefinite passing on of Light to countless others without one's own flame dying illustrates that Wisdom can be shared without loss on one's part. The burning of the wick with the melting of the candle reminds us of the impermanence and transience of all conditioned things, including our own lives.

Reflecting so helps us to treasure every moment alive without attachment. Mindfulness is practiced in not letting the flame be extinguished. This is symbolic of the constant guarding of the Mind against negative factors detrimental to the spiritual life.

In the ceremony, it is most inspiring to see a single flame illuminate a sea of darkness into an ocean of lights that bring brightness to each other.

Three Steps One Bow Ceremony

In this ceremony, devotees usually line up before sunrise to meditatively circumambulate the perimeter of the temple, bowing once every three steps, while chanting mantras or the name of the Buddha in praise of Him.

Upon every prostration, the Buddha can be visualized standing open one's open palms to receive the Buddha. The open palms symbolize lotuses that denote blossoming of purity. (Though the Lotus flower's roots are in the "mud of defilements" it blossoms pure and untainted from it.)

Every prostration is thus the paying of respects to the Buddha (or the countless Buddhas and Bodhisattvas). This practice helps to purify the Mind, humble the ego and lessen obstacles along the spiritual path as one repents misdeeds [also called "unskillful actions"] and aspires towards spiritual improvement. With mindfulness of one's body, speech and Mind during the practice, concentration and calmness can be attained.

As the ceremony is long, it reminds one of the long and difficult journey towards Enlightenment. But it also serves to remind us that as long as we are determined, all difficulties can be overcome. Perseverance in completing the practice despite its difficulties also helps to strengthen our faith in the Buddha and His Teaching to lead us towards Enlightenment.

The break of dawn at the end of the ceremony represents the Light of Wisdom dispelling the darkness of Ignorance as one advances on the journey towards Enlightenment.

Extracts from the book *Be a Lamp Upon Yourself*, 3rd ed.,
Copyright ©1999 by Kong Meng San Phor Kark See Monastery
and dedicated to all Sentient Beings. Texts within [square
brackets] are for clarification and special notes.

**To learn more about the Monijiao Tradition, visit
www.Monijiao.org**

Some Buddhist Rituals and Festivals