

# BUDDHIST SHRINES

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## INTRODUCTION

The shrine is a focal point of meditation and provides a means of accumulating merit through the generosity of making offerings. There are many profound teachings on the nature of offerings, but the essential point is to make offerings with supreme generosity. Such generosity creates a foundation of nonattachment and open awareness that increases the accumulations of both merit and pristine awareness. When making an offering, it is essential to be immersed in the action, and to maintain a very personal sense of the presence of the buddhas, bodhisattvas, enlightened masters of the lineage, and deities of practice.

## SETTING UP A SHRINE

The shrine should be placed where there is no fear of danger or great disturbances. If you place it where there is a lot of fighting, or if the premises are owned by someone who can tell you to leave or not to practice there, then there will be no true sense of refuge or openness.

There are no specific measurements for the height and width of the shrine; this will depend on the space available. Generally, it should be as well-built and dignified as possible, and the higher, the better. If your shrine is in your bedroom, it should not be placed at the foot of your bed or lower than your bed.

The shrine should include a copy of the *Heart Sutra* wrapped in brocade, occupying a special place. Images of deities should never be placed on top of this text. The *Heart Sutra* should not have creases along the words caused by folding the paper. Therefore, it is a good idea to have a pecha version of this sutra (see “resources” below). The shrine should also include an image of Buddha Shakyamuni (a statue, photograph, or painting), and the seven water offering bowls and/or the traditional eight outer offerings set out in a straight line. Other items, such as photographs and statues, may also find a place on the shrine.

The traditional eight outer offerings are:

1. water for drinking
2. water for cleansing the hands and feet
3. flowers (set on top of a base of rice)
4. incense (set on top of a base of rice)
5. a lamp/light
6. perfumed/scented water
7. food (set on top of a base of rice)
8. music/sound (set on top of a base of rice)



This set of offerings represents all objects worthy to be offered. Therefore, along with these actual offerings, we can make unlimited offerings with our imagination. With the offering of drinking water, we simultaneously make an imagined offering to the buddhas and bodhisattvas of all the pure water throughout the world. This is done so that the goodness of Dharma may pervade all beings. When we offer the flower, we also make an imagined offering of all beautiful, desirable objects and forms. Along with incense, we offer all elements of perfection generated by practicing immaculate discipline. The offering of the lamp incorporates all forms of light: that of the sun, the moon, the stars, and all illuminating objects. All of this light is offered to the buddhas and bodhisattvas for the benefit of all beings. With the perfumed water, we mentally include everything of profound and attractive fragrance. With the food offering, all the world's good and nutritious food is offered. Finally, we offer not merely the symbolic music of the practice, but also all the pleasant sounds and music found in the world.

### **MAINTAINING A SHRINE**

Every day, first thing in the morning, fill the seven water bowls left to right; or, if using the eight traditional offerings, fill the three bowls containing water left to right and light the candle and incense. If you drink purified water, you should use the same quality of water for the shrine. It's a tradition, passed down from Indian culture, to use your right hand when touching objects on the shrine. When handling statues, always hold them by the base rather than by the head or torso.

Next, perform three prostrations and recite the MSB Opening Prayers, or at least some abbreviated form of opening prayers corresponding to your phase of practice. If possible, do a session of practice. When putting out candles on the shrine, always snuff them out instead of blowing them out.

In the evening, recite the MSB Closing Prayers or some form of closing prayers, and then empty the water offering bowls from right to left into a specially designated water pitcher. Empty the water outside in an upward direction instead of just pouring it on the ground. The water should be emptied in a place where

nobody will walk on it. The water offering bowls should be dried and placed upside down on the shrine until the next morning.

An alternative to closing the shrine at night is changing the offering water in the morning. After emptying the bowls and before replenishing them, wipe them out with a cloth to keep them clean. Cleaning the shrine is traditionally done on full and new moon days. It is important to keep the shrine as clean as possible.

#### RESOURCES

Items for the shrine can be purchased from many sources. However, the following are some quick links to purchase some of the items mentioned above:

Tibetan Treasures:

<http://www.tibetan treasures.com/index.html>.

Purchase a pecha style copy of the Heart Sutra at Tibetan Treasures:

<http://www.tibetan treasures.com/thtml/ttmerch/Padma%20Publishing/padma texts.html>.

Purchase a pecha brocade cover at Tibetan Treasures:

<http://www.tibetan treasures.com/thtml/ttmerch/textholders.htm>.