



Devotional practices

Devotional practices play an important role in Buddhism. If you have ever visited a Buddhist temple before, you have surely seen followers placing their hands together and making a bow or even doing a full prostration in front of a Buddha statue.

Western Buddhists sometimes tend to neglect devotional practices, but they are an important part of Buddhist practice, especially in times when Buddhist texts and instructions were not as easily accessible to lay people as they are nowadays.

Many Western Buddhists often understand Buddhism as a way of self-perfection through meditative practices, without having to rely on a personal god outside of themselves. Devotional practices seem not to fit this idea of Buddhism at first glance. I once talked to a lovely English lady, who learned meditation under a Buddhist monk. She told me about her

experiences in India and how she was surprised about the lavish adornments and offerings she found in a Buddhist temple. She asked herself if the historical Buddha really wanted to be worshipped in this way. And indeed, there are good reasons to have doubts about this, but this is not the point of devotional practices. Devotional practices are not some form of personality cult or a way to please some kind of heavenly being. The goal of devotional practices is to let go of your ego by directing one's attention beyond the self.

In Buddhism, the idea of an independent self is seen as an illusion and one of the main roots of suffering. In reality, we are not self-sufficient. Our lives depend on many factors that come from outside of ourselves, such as air, water, and nutrients > nourishment, but also love, acceptance, and compassion. Devotional practices remind us of our interdependence and interconnectedness with the rest of the uni-

verse.

Shin Buddhism is often seen as a devotional form of Buddhism, because our main practice is to call Amida Buddha's name in the form of "Namu Amida Butsu" (I entrust myself to Amida Buddha). But it is very important to understand that this is not a passive or fatalistic entrusting into a higher being that controls our fates. True entrusting, in the Shin Buddhist sense, can only be realized on the basis of nonduality. Ultimately, there is no difference between the Buddha and sentient beings. When we become aware of the fact that all existence arises through interdependent origination, we realize that there is no "I" that is calling the Buddha, but true reality, or suchness, is calling itself through us. It is this transforming experience that allows us to let go of our ego-self and see things from a different perspective.

(Thomas Siebert)

人は
優しい
人は
残酷だが

“Men are cruel but Man is kind.”

— Takamitsu Kachiyo

“Men” are groups that share the same sense of values. Within such groups “Man” is an anonymous existence. In such cases Man’s self-consciousness and moral thinking tend to be submerged. This can have frightening consequences. When Man gives himself over to the group, who knows what cruel things they may

have him do. Schoolboys bullying a classmate is the worst example of this.

Imprisoned by the selfish values of the group, Man may not be aware he is hurting others. But Man is also possessed of kindness. When we receive the kindness from those around us, its buds get rooted deep in our hearts and

allow us to breathe. But when we are within the group all such kindness is radically shut off. We need to turn our thoughts to the way of life where the buds of kindness are rooted in our hearts, where Tagore says, “Man is kind.” Have we noticed that side of ourselves?

(Minami Midō, April 2015. Osaka: Shinshū Ōtani-ha Nanbabetuin)



Altar Flowers

In front of the altars of our temples' main halls one finds beautiful flowers on display. They are being offered to the Buddha and are called bukka ("Buddha flowers") in Japanese. Every year in November during Hōonkō, massive altar flowers—standing three meters tall and weighing two hundred kilograms—are offered. It takes a full day to prepare them, ensuring their gorgeous splendor.

Why Are the Flowers Offered?

The custom of offering flowers at temples has been around for a long time. During the "Flower Festival" (Hanamatsuri), which celebrates Śākyamuni's birth, the halls are decorated with flowers of all colors. There is also the custom of "flower strewing" (sange), in which flowers are scattered around the temple's main halls to praise and venerate the Buddha.* One Buddhist sutra says that the Buddha's Pure Land is a world overflowing with flowers. We could thus say that the altar flowers express the world of the Buddha.

(* Today, flower petal-shaped colored paper is used instead.)

What Kinds of Flowers Are Offered?

Only fresh flowers are used. Offering them shares with us the truth of life's impermanence: everything with life will die (wilt away) at some point. The basic shape of the flower offering is created with pine and Japanese cypress, and seasonal tree and grass flowers are also mixed in. Flowers with poison, thorns, or harsh smells, as well as those that bloom on vines, are avoided.

How Are the Flowers Offered?

Altar flowers are placed so that they face us, not the altar's Amida Nyorai but us. One sutra says that the Pure Land's flowers emit light that reaches us. Altar flowers praise the virtue of the Buddha and also are meant to help those offering flowers encounter the Buddha's pure mind. In other words, altar flowers are not simply decorations: they express how the Buddha acts on us.

The O-shinden and O-genkan

On the grounds of Higashi Honganji there are many historical structures, all precious buildings representative of Kyoto's Meiji period architecture. The O-shinden and O-genkan are the oldest, having been built in 1867.

The O-shinden is the center of a set of buildings used for official functions and rituals. After the Goeidō and Amidadō burned down due to the 1864 Hamaguri Gate Rebellion, the O-shinden was quickly rebuilt so that it could serve as a temporary main hall until these buildings were completed. It is notable for having square instead of round pillars, as well as for being divisible into smaller rooms as needed.

The murals in the jōdan no ma (upper room) are a late period masterpiece by Takeuchi Seihō (1864–1942). Painted in 1934, they are entitled “Bamboo and Sparrows in the Wind,” “Delightful Sparrow,” and “Heron Sleeping on an Old Willow.” They respectively express conflict in this life, the joy of encountering the Dharma, and the tranquility of the Pure Land.

The O-genkan was built around the same time as the O-shinden. Today it is still used as a formal main entrance for important events.

While the O-shinden is normally not open to the public, every year during the Hōonkō in November it is used as the venue for otoki (that refers to the meal offered at a Buddhist service) in which the general public can participate.

