

The Way to Worship at the Altar

When worshipping in front of the altar, straighten up your posture and look with reverence to Shakyamuni Buddha. Then, regulate the breath and settle yourself. Light the candles and a stick of incense. Place the incense in the incense holder after holding it up respectfully, and then strike the bell three times. Next, put your hands in *gassho* and bow once. Chant “*Namu Shaka Muni Butsu*” (Homage to Shakyamuni Buddha) or “*Namu kie butsu, namu kie hō, namu kie sō*” (I take refuge in the Buddha, I take refuge in the Dharma, I take refuge in the Sangha). At the end, please bow one more time with your hands in *gassho*.

The Buddha altar is the cornerstone or the stronghold for the hearts and minds of the people living in the house. It is desirable to develop the custom of worshipping at the Buddha altar from our youth.

It is also good to report both happy things and sad things to the Buddha as well as to the family ancestors.

When a New Buddha Altar is Purchased

When a new Buddha altar is purchased or a new main image is placed in the altar, it is necessary to ask one of the priests at your home temple to perform an “Eye Opening Ceremony.” This ceremony breathes life into the Buddha altar or image. It is by means of this ceremony that the Buddha altar becomes a sacred space for the first time.

This ceremony should be held when a new Buddha statue or painting, or a new memorial tablet, is placed in the altar, or in the case when one of these items is refurbished. Also, when one of these items is replaced, a “ceremony to remove the spirit” must be held at the same time the eye-opening ceremony is held.

A Family Buddha Altar

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What is a Family Buddha Altar?

A family Buddha altar isn't simply a place to enshrine and honor our family ancestors. The inside of the altar represents Mt. Sumeru, the world where Buddha resides, and Shakyamuni Buddha is the main image enshrined in the center of the altar. This means that a Buddha altar is a smaller version of the temple's main hall (*Hondo*); it is, as it were, the temple within the family home. Recently, there has been an increase in modern forms of Buddha altars and altars in the form of furniture that are tailored to modern life and living arrangements.

The most significant aspect of worshipping at the Buddha altar is that it is the cornerstone of our actual life of practice and faith as Buddhists. The basis of the *Sotoshu* practice of faith is sitting upright, putting our hands in *gassho*, and bowing. By sitting with a quiet mind in front of Shakyamuni Buddha and bowing with our hands in *gassho*, we reflect on our daily life and it is here that the power to live and practice the Buddha's teachings in our own lives is enhanced. This practice then combines with a feeling of peace in our minds and helps to cultivate a sincere attitude in our lives.

It can be said that by sitting in front of the altar and worshipping our ancestors, we practice the act of repaying our gratitude and sense of obligation for having received life and that we are now here experiencing life. This also brings about a deep feeling that our existence is not lived alone but is rather dependent on and brought about by many other forms of life.



The Way to Set Up the Altar

The most important thing about the way to set up the Buddha altar is that the image of Shakyamuni Buddha is placed in the higher central part and this is because he is honored as the principal figure in the *Sotoshu*. It doesn't matter if this image is made of wood, metal, or cloth (is painted). When a painted image of the Buddha along with the images of the Eminent Ancestor Dogen Zenji, founder of *Eiheiji*, and the Great Ancestor Keizan Zenji, founder of *Sojiji*, collectively called "One Buddha and Two Founders", is placed in the Buddha altar, it should be placed in the middle. In the case where an image of Shakyamuni Buddha is already placed there, this scroll should be placed behind it.

Memorial tablets (*Ihai*) for the family ancestors should be placed to the right or left of the image of the Buddha, while memorial tablets of relatives and older tablets of those people who are connected to your family should be placed to the right and newer tablets on the left.

When there are many memorial tablets and the Buddha altar becomes crowded, it is possible to collect the names on a "combined tablet" (*Gōdōhai*) that has many names written on it.

There are five basic offerings: incense, flowers, light (candles), water, and food and drink (small trays of food, fruit, sweets, etc.). These are offered to Buddha and family ancestors as if they are here.

It isn't the incense smoke that is offered, but rather, a pleasing fragrance. For those who are allergic to incense smoke, it is also fine to offer fragrant herbs.

Small vessels are used to offer tea and water. These vessels are placed on the middle shelf of the altar. When there is one vessel, the rice offering is placed to the right of it. When there are two vessels, the rice is placed in between them. Sweets and fruit are offered on trays which are placed to the right and left of the other vessels.



Not only rice, but none of the offerings should be wasted. For that reason, these offerings should be divided and eaten by everyone in the household. Also, when something is received, it should always be first placed as an offering on the Buddha altar.

The book with the list of family ancestors' names should be placed where it can be easily seen and opened to the page corresponding to that certain day.

On the lower shelf, place flower vase, incense holder, and candle holder. When an incense pot has three legs, one foot should be placed facing you.

The bell, sutra book, and *juzu* (rosary) and any other implements that are used on a daily basis should be placed on the lower shelf or in a drawer. When the inside of the Buddha altar becomes too crowded with things, it is best to have a small table which is placed in front of the altar.