



*Myohoji Temple*

## *Did You Know? #1*

### How to set up your Nichiren Shoshu Altar: Accessories, Offerings, and Care of the Gohonzon

#### **The Butsudan**

The cabinet in which the Gohonzon is enshrined is called a *Butsudan*. It should be sturdy, clean, and secure. If the Butsudan has no doors, a cloth can be draped across the front, which then can be opened and closed.

The Gohonzon should not be placed too high or too low. When you sit or kneel in front of the Butsudan, the bottom of the Gohonzon should be slightly above eye level. Never place things on top of the Butsudan, have shelves surrounding it, or pictures and other articles on the wall near the Butsudan.

There is no substitute for the Gohonzon. Therefore, doing these things are based on sincere faith. The Gohonzon is supreme and our actions in the handling and care of the Gohonzon should reflect that understanding and our sincere faith.

#### **The Butsugu or Accessories**

The articles used for candles, incense, water and greens are called *Butsugu*.

As you face the Butsudan, on the right, place a candleholder with a white candle; on the left, place a vase with evergreens; and in the middle, place the incense burner. These three items together are called “three accessories”. This is an extremely important formality in the practice of this Buddhism. “Five accessories” may also be used: incense burner in the center, a pair of candles one on either side, and two vases with evergreens placed to the outside of each candlestick.

#### **Incense, candles, and, evergreens, each have a significant meaning in Buddhism.**

Incense represents the property of the Law or the essential property of the Buddha’s life. This is the truth to which the Buddha is enlightened. Incense should be the stick type that is available at the temple store. This incense is high quality and will not produce a smoky film that could damage the Gohonzon. Incense should always be laid flat and burned from left to right. The incense is laid flat rather than standing up, so the ashes won’t scatter signifying a scattered mind. You may purchase smokeless incense if the smoke bothers you or others in your household. We usually burn three sticks of incense, representing the Three Treasures--the Treasure of the Buddha, Treasure of the Law, and the Treasure of the Priesthood. The Treasure of the Buddha is Nichiren Daishonin. The Treasure of the Law is the Dai-Gohonzon. The Treasure of the Priesthood is Nikko Shonin and the successive High Priests. If this produces too much smoke, you may use fewer. It also purifies the area in front of the altar.

Candles represent the property of wisdom or the spiritual property of the Buddha's life. This enables the Buddha to see the truth. (Candles should always be white and replaced before burned to the end). If you prefer, you may use electric candles or clear oil burning candles instead of wax candles.

(Do not use colored oil)

In society, we often use cut flowers to express love or respect, or for decoration. They are beautiful to look at, but flowers die in a few days. From the standpoint of Buddhism, cut flowers are inappropriate offerings to the Buddha because of their ephemeral nature. Evergreens, on the other hand, will last a long time if you change the water in the vase(s) every day.

Evergreens represent the physical property of the Buddha's life, the property of compassionate action. Evergreen should be of the type that will remain green for at least a week, always fresh cut. Never use a live plant as an offering because dirt in a container in front of the Gohonzon is not acceptable. Shikimi is used in many countries because it is fragrant and remains green for a long time. However, Shikimi is not available in the United States, so we use something similar.

The incense, candles and evergreens are placed in a straight line. There is special significance to this. In Nichiren Shoshu, we revere Nichiren Daishonin as the True Buddha who possesses the Three Enlightened Properties and whose Three Enlightened Properties comprise His single being. This profound concept teaches, in very simple terms, that the Property of the Law (signified by the incense), the Property of Wisdom (signified by the candles), and the Property of Action (signified by the evergreens) are inseparable and totally integrated as the life of the True Buddha. Incense is made from fragrant wood like Shikimi, therefore, the flame from the candles and the shikimi (evergreen) come together as smoke from the incense. The property of wisdom (candles) and the property of action (shikimi) combined are the property of the Buddha (incense). The candles, evergreens, and incense are in a straight line, to demonstrate that significance in front of the Gohonzon.

The Gohonzon embodies the life of Nichiren Daishonin and the altar is the Buddha's home. Therefore, the area where the Gohonzon is enshrined should always be kept clean. When cleaning the Butsudan area, or Butsudan accessories, use a clean cloth or duster. Place an evergreen leaf or a piece of paper is placed between your lips so as not to breathe on the Gohonzon.

## **The Offerings**

In front of the Butsudan should be a space to place the offerings. The offering closest to the front of the Butsudan is water in a water cup. Place fresh water in a cup in front of the Gohonzon first thing in the morning before anyone uses water in the house. First run the faucet to flush out the still water so that you can offer the Gohonzon clean, cool water. Leave the water for the remainder of the day and then remove the cup and empty out the water before evening Gongyo. You have a choice of putting away the empty cup until the next morning, or returning the empty cup in front of the Gohonzon. If the water cup has a lid, the lid is removed when offering water to the Gohonzon. If you choose to replace the empty cup in front of the Gohonzon, it should be covered with the lid.

If you eat rice, you may offer it to the Gohonzon. DO NOT place uncooked rice on the altar. After the rice is cooked, offer the first portion to the Gohonzon. This, unlike water, should not be left all day but should be offered and then removed.

You may also offer other kinds of vegetarian food to the Gohonzon. When offering fruit, offer the entire fruit, do not cut into pieces (unless it is very large, such as a watermelon) and leave on the altar only as long as it remains fresh. Remove all the labels and clean all fruit before placing on the altar, using a tray or plate that is used only for this purpose, and if possible, place directly in front of the Gohonzon in the space between the water cup and the incense burner. Traditionally we avoid offering odiferous foods such as onions, or garlic.

When offering water each morning, or making other food offerings to the Gohonzon, say this prayer silently:

***I offer deepest gratitude to the Three Treasures of the Buddhism of Sowing. Nam-Myoho-Renge-Kyo.***

Then, ring the bell three times and chant Daimoku three times. Ringing the bell three times signifies appreciation for the Three Treasures.

Other offerings can be made for special events, such as an unopened bottle of sake, wine, or champagne. Be aware of the potential attraction of insects to sweets and other such items. If you do offer cooked vegetarian foods or cut watermelon, make the offering then immediately remove from the altar.

These are the basic offerings to the Gohonzon. The most important thing to understand is that the Gohonzon is the living Buddha.

The doors of the Butsudan are opened when chanting. Otherwise they should be kept closed in order to protect the Gohonzon.

In the event of a fire or natural disaster, protect the Gohonzon first. Always be extremely careful not to spill water or candle wax on the Butsudan area.

If your Gohonzon requires cleaning or repair, contact the Chief Priest at your local Temple.

Lastly, when entering or leaving a home where there is a Gohonzon, always chant *Nam-Myoho-Renge-Kyo* three times, offering a greeting to the Gohonzon.